

Fifth Sunday of Lent

March 29, 2020

St. Luke 20:9-16a:

“Calvary’s Climb Confronts Us With . . . When Life Wears”

- I. The Parable.
- II. The Way It Is.
- III. Viewing It Rightly.

Pilgrim Lutheran Church
2155 N. Oakland Avenue
Decatur Illinois 62526

Dear Friends in Christ,

Polycarp was a 2nd century bishop in the Greek city of Smyrna. He was a disciple of the Apostle John. The early church historian, Eusebius of Caesarea, writes that Polycarp was arrested by the Roman authorities and burned at the stake before a cheering crowd because of his faith in Christ.

Prior to his execution, the Roman proconsul pressed him hard and said, "Swear, and I will release you. Revile Christ." Polycarp replied, "Eighty and six years have I served Him, and he never did me wrong; and how can I blaspheme my King who has saved me?"

Would we do as well? We do get wrapped up by this world, don't we? An hour or so on a Sunday morning for worship, and maybe a Wednesday here and there, then back to that which can quickly smother the reality of life's last moment. And not too many weeks ago we entered into world-wide affliction - covid-19 - and an intense scramble for answers, but few voices calling the world to look up! What will we do with God's Word? "I form light and create darkness, I make well-being and create calamity, I am the Lord, who does all these things." (Is. 45:7) *Calvary's Climb Confronts Us With . . .*

LIFE ISN'T WHAT WE MIGHT THINK IT IS

I. The Parable.

Our text begins: "And he began to tell the people this parable: 'A man planted a vineyard and let it out to tenants and went into another country for a long while.'" (v. 9) The owner of the vineyard is God. The vineyard is the Kingdom of God. "Tenants" is a reference to God's Old Testament Israel - the church. Next this:

"When the time came, he sent a servant to the tenants, so that they would give him some of the fruit of the vineyard. But the tenants beat him and sent him away empty-handed. And he sent another servant. But they also beat and treated him shamefully, and sent him away empty-handed. And he sent a third. This one they wounded and cast out. (vv. 10-12)

The "servants" represent the prophets who brought the tenants God's Word. The "fruit" God expected refers to the evidence of repentance and faith. And, again, the "tenants" is a reference to the Old Testament.

Repeatedly - persistently - God reached into the life of His Old Testament Church with the promise of the coming Christ. Repeatedly - persistently - the vast majority of the church sought the worship of the unbelieving nations and welcomed spiritual intimacy with their gods! God frequently referred to His Old Testament church as a "prostitute". We're told:

"Then the owner of the vineyard said, 'What shall I do? I will send my beloved son; perhaps they will respect him.' But when the tenants saw him, they said to themselves, 'This is the heir. Let us kill him, so that the inheritance may be ours.' And they threw him out of the vineyard and killed him." (vv. 13-15a)

Of course, the son is Jesus. The killing of the son is a reference to most of the Old Testament church's rejection and crucifixion of Jesus. And then this: "What then will the owner of the vineyard do to them? He will come and destroy those tenants and give the vineyard to others." (vv. 15b-16)

We're looking at God's judgment against His Old Testament church and His great inclusion of the Gentiles into the church. We're looking at the love of God to place upon His Son what should be

our suffering, death and hell for our sin. We're looking at the fact that even now, much of the New Testament church is driving itself into rejection over the fact that humans are truly sinful and undeserving of God's love. We're looking at a world stupefied with the thinking that humanity will get its act together and solve all its problems. History reveals otherwise. We go from one upheaval to another, as we are once again witnessing.

II. The Way It Is.

Quite a number of years ago I made reference to Ann Tyler's novel entitled *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant*. I referred to one part of the book that tells about a boy named Luke who is hitchhiking. He's hitchhiking partly because he wants to visit his relatives in another city and partly because he's running away from his troubled family. In his travels, three motorists give him rides. They are people whose lives have been shattered; who are trying to get their worlds back together.

First, there's the mother whose teenaged daughter has become sullen, rebellious and hateful. Every day the mother spends a lot of time driving to no-where in particular because in the car she has time to think and to remember her daughter as a little girl. She says to Luke, "In those days, she liked me a lot. I was really a good mother, and she liked me."

Secondly, there's the middle-aged man whose wife is divorcing him. He's on a desperate journey into his past - a journey to visit all his high school girlfriends because, as he tells Luke, "They liked me; they thought I was fine. Or, at least, they seemed to."

Third, there's a truck driver who gives Luke a ride. As they ride along, they pass a highway sign pointing to a hospital down the road to the right. The truck driver tells Luke that years before his pregnant wife, Dotty, and he were traveling in the truck down that highway when his wife went into premature labor. He turned the truck down the road to the hospital. Dotty gave birth to a five-pound girl and they named her Lisa. But the child did not live long. He tells Luke, "I never bounced back so good. I pass that hospital road and you know...I halfway believe that if I made the turnoff, things would be just like before. Dotty would be holding my hand, and my Lisa would be waiting to be born." (Ann Tyler, *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant*; New York: Berkeley Books, 1982, pp. 236-248)

When I first read through the sermon text those stories came to mind; people looking for answers or help, but never looking to God's love in Christ. And then there's the reality that most, if not all people, have deep-seeded issues that dog their lives. You would be amazed at the people who outwardly appear confident and happy, but inside ache and cry. Maybe it's you. *Life isn't what we might think it is*. What has been unfolding across this planet has made that quite obvious . . . hasn't it?

We live in a horribly sinful, fallen world. A world rotten and bleeding to death with sin and its consequences. We all (you and I) battle sin and its consequences. It's that sin that drives Jesus to the cross. For us! The real sadness is that most people are like the tenants in our text who want nothing to do with Jesus and drive Him away from their lives.

III. Viewing It Rightly.

Here are the words of Scripture we want in front of us:

Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died - more than that, who was raised - who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us. [And then the following words which are so fitting for the most frightening moments of life] Who shall separate us from the love of God in Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger or sword?...No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us." (Rom. 8:33-35,37)

A man wandered into a church looking for the pastor for some spiritual guidance. The pastor asked him about his religious background. The man replied, "I went to Sunday School as a child, but I can remember only one verse from the Bible, John 3:16." The man then quoted the verse as he remembered it: "God so loved the world that He gave His only *forgotten* Son that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish but have everlasting life." The pastor, being sensitive to man's searching, noted to himself that the man had substituted the word "begotten" with "forgotten". The pastor asked, "Do you know why God forgot His Son?" "No," replied the man. The pastor said, "It was because He wanted to remember you."

Jesus makes His way to the cross. We know why He willingly goes there; to save us from our sin, the ones of yesterday, the ones of this day and the ones that will hit us in the days to come. He's on the way to secure eternal life for us. We can say with the Psalmist - we must say with the Psalmist in this difficult time - "Oh give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures forever!...Out of my distress I called on the Lord; the Lord answered me and set me free." (Ps. 118:1,5)

Calvary's Climb Confronts Us With: Life Isn't What We Might Think It Is. Well, in Jesus it isn't. As Martin Luther said: "Whoever sees Christ as a mirror of the Father's heart, actually walks through the world with new eyes." So, how do you see it?

Amen.

Pastor Bill Abbott