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“Unlimited Wine” The Rev. Aaron M. G. Zimmerman (10/8/2023, Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost)

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Let us pray.

Almighty God made the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be always acceptable in thy sight, who lured our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

A friend of mine once told me about her brother's wedding. It was in a giant church in Manhattan, Roman Catholic church, and they were all gathered right before the ceremony in the back of the church for the procession.

And the groom, her brother, turned to one of his friends, a groom's man, as they were about to walk down the aisle to have this whole thing in front of 400 people.

Nothing that can't be undone.

When I first heard that, I had very judgmental thoughts about that person, as maybe some of you who are not now as far along in sanctification as am I, but I realized that he was giving voice to something that everybody does, which is when you're going into a situation that feels vulnerable and risky, you look for an out.

You begin to think about, well, if this all goes sideways, what is my alternative?

What is my batna in business school economics terms?

What's my best alternative to the negotiated agreement?

If this thing doesn't work, what's the off ramp?

Jason Bourne does this, played brilliantly by Matthew Damon, the top secret operative who forgets his identity, but he's trained as a killing machine.

So Jason Bourne, every time he's in a situation, he's looking for where are the threats and where are the exits?

You know, he's like Al Melis, who, if you don't know, was police chief and was trained

to look at the exits and evaluate, who's packing, you know, all these sorts of things.

You know, looking for the risk and trying to minimize and knowing what your exit strategy will be.

We do something that Bernabé Brown calls dress rehearsal for catastrophe.

We do this in our heads a lot.

Parents do this with their children.

Bernabé Brown talks about seeing her children and almost every parent can relate to this,

or if you cared for a child whom you love deeply, you see them sleeping so peacefully in their beds at night.

Your heart is filled with the love you didn't know you could have. And then you start imagining these awful things happening to them. It sounds weird if you've never had that experience, but it is universal.

And what you're doing is I love this person so much.

It is such a vulnerable place to be because what if something were to happen to them?

So let me prepare emotionally now by imagining the catastrophe.

It's sort of a way emotionally looking for the exits.

If too much, if I put too much into this, the risk of loss is too great.

We practice for disaster all the time.

Our kids do it in schools when they prepare for a mass shooter.

You know, they had these drills.

If you grew up during the height of the Cold War, you got under your desk in case there

was a nuclear war, we prepare for these things all the time.

We live in fear, like I said, just waiting for the other shoe to drop.

And that's what the gospel passage is about today.

Now you thought I was about a vineyard and Jesus being sort of mean somehow and people getting beat up.

I'm going to walk through the passage from Matthew 21, and I think it reveals something

about who God is, about who we are, how we think about God.

And I do think, nay, I know, what we believe about God impacts our whole life.

What you believe about God, who you think God is, affects how you move through the world.

And this is what Jesus is dealing with here because they're people who, like us, have some ideas about God that are off base.

So we're going to try to move a little bit more towards, by God's grace and the working

of the Holy Spirit to who God might actually be and how that would impact.

How you, person like me, who lives in fear and worries about that other shoe dropping,

is that consistent with what God is like.
That's what Matthew 21 is about.
So let's look at Matthew 21.
We begin with Robert Mondavi, that great Northern California wine grower and entrepreneur.
And he is planting this vineyard.
He makes it kind of state of the art.
He gives all the precautions and preparations for it, gets the latest in fermentation vats and wine presses and all of it.
He sets it all up and he finds some people to work the vineyard and he leaves it in their hands and he goes off to the Bahamas and then he waits.
And he then comes back to check on it.
Now in case you didn't know, the land owner is God, the tenants, us, and the people that he was talking to then, this wasn't just some random agricultural story hour with Jesus, like there's a point here.
So God is the land owner, the tenants with the people and kind of by extension us.
And Jesus is talking to them.
A little bit of a dance break here.
I'm not going to actually dance.
It's theologically and metaphorically a dance break because I need to back up, please do not squirm in your view.
Even that was too much, Chris.
Jesus is time in the story that he's telling the way this would work.
When we hear tenant, we think like a monthly lease.
Like why would you rent a vineyard and just pay money to work at a vineyard?
That seems kind of crazy.
Unless it's an aggra to resmo in Florence and then I understand.
But what's happening here is this way, this leasing works is they work the vineyard.
Then the harvest comes, they get to keep some of the produce.
That's how they get paid.
So they take care of it, they get some of the produce and some of the wine.
The point of the vineyard is to make wine.
And so what the land owner is doing, he's coming back and he's saying, now it's time for me to collect my share and you get to keep your share and everybody gets wine and everybody's happy and it's a blessing to everybody.
That's how this works.
But the tenants, when the land owner sends the servants to collect his wine and let them keep their wine, the tenants quote, the 1989 song by Faith No More.

You want it all and you can't have it.
No, you're not getting any of the wine.
We're keeping it all for ourselves and so they take the servants of
the land owner and
they kill one, beat the other, stone the other, very creative in their
brutality.
And the owner, Mr. Mondabi, what a chump.
To me, strike one and you're out.
I need him to kill my employee, I'm sorry, we're done.
But he's like, we'll try again.
I'll send more servants this time.
Same results and the land owner, still not really getting who he's
dealing with here.
Finally he says, oh, send my son, they'll respect him.
So the son goes and of course it's worse, they cast him out of the
vineyard, they kill him
because they're thinking, you know, if we kill the son, then there's
no one to inherit
the vineyard when Mondabi dies, we'll get to keep it forever.
It'll be ours.
So they kill the son and then Jesus stops and he asks his audience.
So what do you think the land owner should do with these tenants?
It's easy, what any good responsible person would do, you get rid of
them, kill those
wretched people, put them to death, I mean they're murderers, they
deserve capital punishment.
And get new tenants.
And Jesus then talking about the stone that gets rejected, becoming
the cornerstone.
And he says, basically if you reject the things of God, these things
will come back on you.
If you reject the source of life, you're embracing death.
And so yeah, he says, you know, if you put yourself up against what
the land owner is doing,
there will be negative consequences to you.
Here end at the lesson.
Now what in the world does all that mean for people that are terrified
of the other shoe dropping?
Well the meaning gets a little clearer when you start asking why would
the tenants act this way with the vineyard?
Well it's showing us in this story a couple of things.
First, the tenants, us, what Jesus is trying to tell them and tell us
is that everything we have,
the vineyard of our lives has been given to us, it is not ours, it is
not yours, everything you have,
everything in your closet, everything what you drove here today, the
stuff in your bank account,
it's actually not yours, it's all been given to you.
Remember what you had when you came into this earth?
Nothing, everything's been given to you, even the intellect and drive

and work ethic you used to get all the stuff you have.
Where did you get that? It was given to you.
And God has given us all this stuff to be a blessing to others.
Again that's the point of the vineyard, it's not just to be a vineyard that looks pretty behind your wedding photos.
It is there to make wine, to be a blessing to you who's working the vineyard and to all the other people and ultimately the owner of the vineyard.
It's supposed to produce things that bless other people.
But many of us like those tenants forget that and we think we own it and we think it's ours and we keep it all for ourselves.
And we make it about us, we hoard and if we run out of space we get a storage unit so we can hoard more.
And we forget that we are called to give away.
It's a good reminder in stewardship season.
Thank you, Lectionary Committee, for this reading.
But as I said in the beginning, there's a lot more here than just giving away the things that God has entrusted to us.
There's something here about God too because why do these people hold onto the things?
Why do they refuse to give it away?
Why do they kill the servants who come to not take everything from them?
They still get to keep their wine, they just want the landowners.
It's because these tenants at root believe that God is not trustworthy.
God will not take care of them.
They can't give it all away or at least with the landowners is because there won't be enough for me.
It's this worldview based on scarcity and fear.
If I give away then there won't be enough for me because something bad might happen.
There might be a drought next year or some fungus on the grapes.
I don't know. We better keep it all for ourselves just in case.
And that worldview fundamentally fails to trust that God will take care of them.
Gotta keep it all for me because something bad could happen on the road.
And I can't take that risk. It might hurt me, it might hurt others, it might hurt God,
but that's just the cost I'll have to pay.
Because something bad might happen and I gotta keep it all for myself.
In His great mercy, Jesus offers us an opportunity to loosen the death grip that we have on our stuff.
Because He sees it's killing us.
If you live in this mentality that God's not gonna take care of you, you have to take care of yourself, you gotta hold on to your stuff, you gotta be untrusting of God and others.
It creates a hard, egocentric life.
And if you trust God, you may find that He's actually trustworthy

and you can rest in that as opposed to being anxious all the time.
Wouldn't you like to not be anxious all the time?
I mean, the men's are great, take them, please.
But wouldn't it be great if you could just trust God and rest in that
and not whitenuckle your way through everything and dress for her's
catastrophe
and look for the off ramp in every vulnerable situation?
Wouldn't that be great? That's what Jesus is offering here, that's
what we're talking about.
So do it.
Do it.
And go.
Are you now not anxious? Did you do it?
I mean, I'm a...
Why am I in this pulpit? I'm a preacher. I tell you what to do.
Right? That's how sermons work. I tell you what to do and you do the
things.
Did you do it?
He didn't.
Well, that's why there's more to Matthew's gospel.
It doesn't end with Matthew 21 because God knows that we can't just
turn it off.
We can't just do this thing. I mean, one, he's so great.
He loves us enough to tell us this story and to invite us into a
different way of life
and we get the sense that he's going to keep doing it.
He's going to keep sending people to remind us of this.
I mean, he sent the servants the first time and the second time and
then sent the son.
This God is so gracious. He wants to keep telling you the good news
that he will take care of you.
But what if we don't hear the good news?
What if we're still anxious and afraid and can't quite get ourselves
to trusting God
with the people we love, with the stuff on our own lives?
What if we still try to control things and live in that place of
scarcity and fear?
What if we're like the tenants who killed the son?
Well, they do kill the son.
If you keep reading Matthew's gospel, the son is killed.
The people try to keep all the wine for themselves and they kill the
son.
But it turns out there's more wine.
And it's poured out from the hands and the feet and the side of the
son who they kill.
And even when you try to stop God's grace, you can't keep it in
because even the thing which you try to do to stop God's grace ends up
being the thing
that redeems the whole world because this is the grace of God.
It has no limit.

It is poured out again and again and again.
You cannot keep God's wine bottled up.
And we're going to invite you to this table,
tenants, all of us who have killed the son
and have tried to hold back the grace of God
to live in the lie of fear and scarcity.
And yet the wine is poured out for you and for me.
You're about to taste it.
It is the grace of God which never runs out for tenants like you and
me.
Amen.