

## Message: "Squandering God's Trust"

### Scripture: Matthew 21:33-46

<sup>33</sup>"Listen to another parable. There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a wine press in it, and built a watchtower. Then he leased it to tenants and went to another country. <sup>34</sup>When the harvest time had come, he sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his produce. <sup>35</sup>But the tenants seized his slaves and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. <sup>36</sup>Again he sent other slaves, more than the first; and they treated them in the same way. <sup>37</sup>Finally he sent his son to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.' <sup>38</sup>But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, 'This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance.' <sup>39</sup>So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him. <sup>40</sup>Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?' <sup>41</sup>They said to him, 'He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the harvest time.' <sup>42</sup>Jesus said to them, 'Have you never read in the scriptures: 'The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord's doing, and it is amazing in our eyes'? <sup>43</sup>Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom. <sup>44</sup>The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls.' <sup>45</sup>When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they realized that he was speaking about them. <sup>46</sup>They wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowds, because they regarded him as a prophet.

Have you ever heard the saying, "there are two kinds of people you should never trust: a religious leader who tells you how to vote, and a politician who tells you how to pray." I read that in the Grace United Methodist Church's newsletter this week; Grace's new pastor, Reverend Daniel Viehland, had written an excellent pastor's pen in which he addressed the voting season before us - and he was talking about how many of us are asking the same question, which is: "Who do we trust?"

Today's scripture lesson has Jesus talking about trust, specifically when it is broken. We have the well-known parable of the tenants of the master's vineyard, entrusted to work the vines on behalf of the master who was out of the country. When the harvest time comes, the master sends his slaves to collect the harvest from the tenants - but the tenants rebel, breaking the trust the master had in them; they beat and killed the master's representatives. The master then sent a greater number of slaves in a second attempt to bring in the harvest, but they met the same rebellion. The master then thought to send his son, whom he thought they would respect - but they wound up killing him as well, thinking they'd gain his inheritance. Jesus asks the chief priests and elders at that point what they thought the master would do to those tenants when he returned; they responded that the master would exercise his wrath upon them and put them to a miserable death, after which he would lease his fields to more trustworthy tenants. Jesus then points out the irony of it all, that their conclusion is correct

- but applies directly to them, the chief priests and elders who have broken the trust of God in their corruption of God's will.

This is a parable centered on our basic human understanding of how trust ought to work by talking about when trust is broken over time. When those entrusted with certain responsibilities reverse course and break relational agreements which are essential to healthy human interactions those interactions suffer and sometimes cease altogether. It's a basic truth that relationships are largely measured by the trust they embody or lack; and for relationships that lack trust, they always tend to drain from life more than add to life.

Anyone who's paying attention can readily identify that the human race has a trust problem which Jesus brings to light. We have a hard time knowing who to trust for the multiple ways trust is being broken right before our eyes yet often without meaningful redress by those in power - almost as if it doesn't matter if trust is broken. This presents us with a profound danger we all face when witnessing repeated breaches of trust - that as they grow more numerous we may draw closer to seeing those breaches as somehow unavoidable, or worse, somehow normal and thus acceptable - which they never, ever are.

This week, we learned of a major breach of trust by the leadership of Cornell University and law enforcement officials, where two years ago a woman was gang raped by seven Chi Phi fraternity members; the case was dismissed before any serious investigation had been undertaken. It is becoming clear that the university leadership and the law enforcement officials have broken the trust of many who count on due process and accountability from those in charge, let alone the broken trust in those who perpetrated the crime. It makes terribly clear that misogyny is still alive and well in our country.

This is simply outrageous.

It was hard to miss a recent breaking of trust involving clearly-defined partisan strategies when Senator Eric Schmitt of Missouri accused Special Counsel Jack Smith of perjury when Smith denied having been in Atlanta for a basketball game between the Golden State Warriors and the Atlanta Hawks (the senator supposedly had text messages confirming this); it turns out that Jack Smith had attended an Iowa Hawkeye's game in Maryland, not an Atlanta Hawke's game in Atlanta, and that Senator Schmitt had mistaken one team for the other in his blind pursuit of a perjury accusation. The unbelievability of his mistake and its presentation was captured by an expression on the face of Senator Katie Britt, who is a member of Schmitt's party; you can see her expression on the

screen. I love this picture because it captures how I have felt so many times when watching the news - staring at what's going on in disbelief, with my mouth open, hoping what was unfolding before me wasn't really happening.....(is this how you have felt as well?) After this full-display error came to light, and after calling Jack Smith a dirtbag, Schmitt made no acknowledgement of the error, nor any apology for the name calling. This is where I say - YOU CAN'T MAKE THIS STUFF UP! And there are a growing number of similar things going on in the highest legal offices of our government - which are making clear that the weaponized leadership of our Department of Justice is a thing of eroding trust.

This is simply outrageous.

And then, considering the major factors that erode trust, one of the most obvious being the telling of lies, I found this on Wikipedia: "During and between his terms as president of the United States, Donald Trump has made tens of thousands of false or misleading claims. Fact-checkers at *The Washington Post* documented 30,573 false or misleading claims during his first presidential term, an average of 21 per day.<sup>[1][5][6][7]</sup> Commentators and fact-checkers have described Trump's lying as unprecedented in American politics,<sup>[13]</sup> and the consistency of falsehoods as a distinctive part of his business and political identities.<sup>[14]</sup> Scholarly analysis of Trump's tweets found significant evidence of an intent to deceive.<sup>[15]</sup>"

(I tried to find out how many documentable lies president Trump has said in his second term thus far but couldn't find any fresh statistics, which makes me think they've stopped counting - the trust has been so broken, that it is becoming an unreported expectation for the president to lie. I did hear something I thought would be funny if it weren't pretty much true - that the only time the president lies is when he opens his mouth or texts a message; sadly, I think we've discovered that's pretty accurate!).

This is simply outrageous.

We, as a country, are discovering the high cost of trust's breaking in these and many other significant ways. There used to be a perhaps naïve trust that the law is meant to apply to everyone, that injustice is never to be covered up, and that lying should never be tolerated especially from those in positions of trust - and such trusts are under terrible strain these days as the people in leadership over our country repeatedly and egregiously break the trust of the population they are supposed to serve. We're finding out just how easily and repeatedly trust can be broken when those in charge feel accountable only to themselves -

that is, if the tenants decide that the master's field belongs to them to do with as they will.

This is simply outrageous.

Let me ask you - are you outraged? I hope you are - for that is what is needed most in these days of broken trust - outrage at its breaking - for it is our outrage over trust's breaking that is required to both stop the damage being done and move into re-building the trust needed to move more effectively into the future.

The parable makes it clear that there will be an accounting; broken trust wounds the lives of those who once trusted, and such wounds evoke a pain that grows and remembers. It may be that we are approaching a first step of that accounting in the voting season before us, but we are fooling ourselves if we believe our work will be done whatever comes to pass. Jesus is making a point about human nature in this parable, especially regarding the fragile morality of those in power, how easy it is to want to play God with the power others give certain people, how tempting it is to play games of vengeance and favoritism to move certain agendas forward. The warning Jesus is giving is to remember who owns the field of the world, who is sovereign over all creation, who is the only entity morally qualified to determine what is best for the world - and it's not us. We need to remember who is the only one trustworthy enough to lead an untrustworthy people in the paths of righteousness.

That is why I say that one of the most important things we can do as people of faith is maintain our outrage when our faith is abused. I do not say this alone; I am joined by Jesus as he relates the parable's outcome and its implication for those who presently lead others astray. There will be an accounting. This should not bring us glee due to the prospect of vengeance or punishment towards those who have misled; our glee should be joy over things being set right, justice prevailing, and most importantly, learning from this episode of human deviance the lessons that both keep this from happening again and show us a better future we can work toward as God's people - as God's tenants overseeing God's field.

If you are outraged these days, I say good; I think Jesus says this, too. We need to remain outraged at the abuses of our administration, at Cornell University's leadership, at ICE agent's violence, at the rise in concentration camps, at the erasure of clean air and water standards, at the exclusion of LGBTQ individuals, at the debacles of the Iran war, the Gaza war, the Ukraine war, and so many other situations where human depravity is on full display. We need to

remain outraged at outrageous things, for outrage is nothing less than paying appropriate attention to things gone excessively wrong.

But it is very important we manage our outrage effectively. Jesus showed us that outrage is a thing best translated into faithful response, moving it into determined motivation for real and lasting change. The template for that change has been with us for at least 2000 years; it's basic premise is the loving of God and each other without exception. Many forces and personalities have tried to malign that template for their own glory or power - but it will not be swayed, if the people of God are not swayed. That's us; we're the people of God whom God entrusts the conveyance of his will, the translation of his love, the working of his justice, here on earth; that's us, each one of us as we try our best to follow Jesus and Jesus alone. And perhaps this is the exact area where we gain the benefits of unbroken trust - that when we stay the course of justice, when we speak truth to power, and when we insist on God's will exclusively and consistently, we know God is with us. Or rather, that we are with God, in spirit and in truth. There is no better way to deal with the broken trust our world continues to exhibit than to know who's worth trusting - and to always start that list with God.