

The Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost
October 8, 2017

Text: Matthew 21:33-36

Theme: "Grape Grabbers or The Big Squeeze"

What would you do if suddenly you were given a million dollars? I asked four CCA students that question as part of our chapel on September 27. I have the answers here: "go on a cruise and give the rest for chapel offering," "give to the poor, some to CCA, buy a house for family, buy phone, buy land grandfather farms and give it to him, give money to the church, buy a car for my sister," "buy a new I-phone," buy a house." Again, what would you do? I know a million dollars is not what it used to be, so what would you do with 10 million instead?

Would you grab, hold onto it, squeeze it tight? No matter how tight the squeeze, that money can easily slip away. We do put the squeeze on what we hold to be precious. What we squeeze says a lot about us. That could be something we are convinced we have earned and worked hard for. On the other hand, it could be something that we really haven't earned, just want it, even covet it in a sinful way--which brings us to our text and these (grapes).

Jesus tells a story about grapes, actually about some people charged with growing them. His story is about some bad people. In this story these people are tenants. They are not the owners. They are not the developers. They are the beneficiaries of someone else's land, someone else's initial work, someone else's risk. It is the owner of the land who has planted the vineyard. He has built a wall around it for its protection. Under his ownership, a winepress has been dug for processing the crop, and finally a watchtower has been constructed to provide a good vantage point for guarding it.

He hands the working and care of the vineyard over to tenants. It is handed over in trust. He trusts they know how to do the work entrusted to them and will do it. This is a vineyard for growing grapes and processing from the grapes the fruit of the vine—wine. The owner trusts that they are trustworthy and will honor the agreement; that is, a certain portion of the fruit will be given over to the owner, or a money equivalent, and the rest would be theirs as the reward, the wages for their labor. His was the investment, the risk, theirs was the sweat. They turned out to be bad men who would really put the squeeze on all the grapes.

Among those who were hearing the story were some real squeezers also, the Jewish leadership. In verse 45 of our text we read of the chief priests and the Pharisees. In verse 23 we read of the chief priests and the elders. Those hearing this story have just heard another story from Jesus, one that also involved a vineyard. It was the “know” and “go” story we heard last week, the story of knowing what the father wanted and then going to do it. For the leadership it was “know” and “no,” story. They knew the Father’s will but were not doing it. They were giving the appearance of “yes,” but their actions were shouting “no.” As they hear this story today their ears have been primed and maybe even pricked. They will be quite prickly by the time Jesus finishes today.

These leaders were given the stewardship of the means of God’s grace to His people. The chief priests were in charge of the temple sacrifices and worship. They were God’s servants to see all was observed according to God’s instructions for the blessing of His people. God had promised to be among His people at the temple to cleanse, strengthen, renew, and direct. From the Pharisees came teachers of the law. They would aid the people in understanding what they were hearing as the Law and the Prophets were being read in the synagogues. Application would be given for living as God’s people—neighbor to neighbor, brother to brother no matter what station in life. The elders would be

involved with civil administration, to see just decisions were rendered. They were all charged with stewardship of the fruit of righteousness in the land for God's honor and the well-being on their neighbors.

It turns out that was a lot of squeezing going on. Those in the story became quite territorial. They wanted to keep all the fruit for themselves. They began to build crime upon crime. Finally it came to the point where they reason, "This is the heir. Come, let us kill him and have his inheritance." (vs 38) They were squeezing tight what was not theirs to keep. The Jewish leadership had the same issue. Caiaphas, the High Priest, would refer to the temple as He spoke other members of the Sanhedrin as "our place" (John 11:48). He was afraid the Romans would come and take it. Now obviously there could have been, certainly should have been, concern for the people, but from Jesus' encounters it seems more likely there was a bigger concern for comfy living in the vineyard.

The Pharisees did not like having their teaching authority questioned by Jesus, even offended. There was a concern about the people being led astray, but there was also concerned about being exposed as wrong and being shamed. Yes, they were squeezing tight. "These are all our grapes!"

What's our story? I began by speaking of being given a million or even ten million dollars. We, believers, have been entrusted with something much more valuable. We have been given the keys to the kingdom. Such were the words spoken by the Christ to Peter at Peter's confession that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of the Living God. The keys have been entrusted to the body of Christ, the church, to the office of pastor has been entrusted to supervision and execution of the use of the keys on behalf of the body. We are called to faithful stewardship. Paul knew how precious the treasure. We read in Philippians 2, "⁷But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ...⁸For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ

⁹and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith.” The Gospel is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes. In God’s Word we do have instruction for teaching, for rebuking, for correction, and for training in how to live rightly to be fully equipped for doing the work God puts right before us to do (2 Timothy 3:16, 17).

Yes, everything else could be considered loss in comparison. All has been given, entrusted as a child of God in His kingdom. Why are so tempted to hang on to this all as though it were the treasure? We see it as a way to advance the kingdom of me.

This squeezing of the good for the wrong reason is treacherous. It is hard to be faithful when so much unfaithfulness is going on around. That’s why the tenants had things like a wall and a watchtower. There were ways to keep out thieves and varmints and to detect and deal with their presence if they somehow managed to slip through. There was no shortage of work to do in pruning, and fertilizing, and harvesting and processing. Yes, the work was hard, certainly all the harder if you decided to squeeze what was not yours as though it were. The master had gone away, but what if he came back? It was nerve racking to keep one eye on your legitimate labor and the other eye on the lookout for the one who would bring retribution for your criminal grape grabbing.

It was treacherous and slippery. It would not end well. There is somewhat of a Nathan/David ending to Jesus’ story telling today. As David spoke words pronouncing his own guilt upon hearing a story from the mouth of Nathan so the Jewish leadership pronounces their guilt. At the end of the parable Jesus asks, “When the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?” (vs 40) “He will put those wretches to a miserable death and let out the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the fruits in their seasons.” (vs 41) ‘He will put those wretches to a wretched end.’ “Those bad men in

a bad manner, he will destroy them.’ Then the gotcha. They realized He was speaking about them (vs 45).

What does this have to say to me and you? Are we bad folks, sinners before God? We confessed as much as we began our worship. Yes, we are deserving of a wretched end, bad folks who should be destroyed in a bad manner. It’s our general confession of sin. We could mouth it without thinking. Maybe we could be more specific as new creations in Christ who struggle walk as new creations. We have been given much, all, and were quite tempted to squeeze as though it is ours outright. Do we move from servant to lord, from tenant to owner? Is it ‘my time,’ ‘my money,’ ‘my opportunities?’ Do we squeeze relationship, treasures, time for all it’s worth for me? Everything else is rubbish, everyone else rubbish compared to me?

Ask yourself for ever \$100 how many dollars are offered back to the Lord’s service, of the 110 waking hours in a week, how many are spent helping someone else? How often is a decision made by asking, “which way will allow me to honor God and serve others the most?” instead of, “Which way will magnify my well being?” Do we ask such questions wishing others could just come up to my level and forget that we never measure up to God’s level?

So we put the big squeeze on something big, or something not so big, squeeze it all as though it’s all mine. And as you see, what we have is a mess (squeezing the grapes). The result is destruction, ruination for all.

Much better is squeezing the stewardship entrusted. Jesus quotes Psalm 118, “The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone.” (vs 22, 23, Matthew 21:42) The builders were whose ears should have been burning were the Jewish leadership. They had been taking a good long look at this Jesus rock, looking through the lens of their expectations and specifications and decided he would not do at all. They rejected Him.

They put the squeeze on Him to quiet Him. When that didn't work they put the squeeze on Him to eliminate Him. 'Come, let us kill him and the kingdom will remain ours!' Were they successful? They thought so for a little while.

All the time Jesus had the squeeze on the stewardship given Him by the Father, the One coming not to be served, but to serve and give His life as a ransom for many. The Father used His rejection by the builders as part of the plan to put the squeeze of justice on Him for our sin that would have crushed us forever. He is the cornerstone. It is all God's doing. He suffered and died as the perfect offering for our sin. He has been raised up to life in total victory over death and the devil. He is reigning at God's right hand fully ruling over all for the sake of His vineyard, the church. He entrusts the church to do His work until He returns. We remember we are those entrusted, not owners.

Remember my CCA student answers about the million dollars? Actually it was two groups of two. Two were simply they had been given a million dollars. The other two were told God had directly given them a million dollars and would return in one year to find out how they had used it. Two of the responses were mostly other directed. You would think it would have been the two told about the God part. Not so, one was of that group, the other not. The one young lady (2nd grade) who had not been told the God part said she would 'go on a cruise and give the rest for chapel offering.' She was reflecting, without being told, being a new creation in Christ.

We are Christ's servants, brothers and sisters, individually and as the body. When we squeeze it all like it is ours, we make a mess of it all. When we use it for what it is, a trust from God, we have the fruit of His kingdom. We can do that because of God's good squeeze of us. For Jesus' sake. Amen