

**Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Watertown, WI**

“R E S P E C T”

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“Finally he sent his son to them saying, ‘They will respect my son’” (Matthew 21:35).

A thirty-nine year old woman was recently arrested for disorderly conduct. She was on an Amtrak train traveling from Oakland, California to Salem Oregon, a sixteen hour trip. She was riding in the “Quiet Car” yet was talking loudly on her cell phone for nearly the entire trip. Passengers reminded her it was a Quiet Car. She ignored them and continued talking. An employee of Amtrak asked her to move to another car. She ignored him too, and became verbally abusive. Finally the police removed her from the train, whereupon she told reporters she felt “disrespected” by the whole incident.

It seems the word “respect” has emerged as a favorite go-to-word for anyone who has ever felt slighted or overlooked. Poorly behaving politicians and celebrities, convicted felons . . . everyone’s demanding respect. Athletes seem obsessed with the topic. When Donovan McNabb joined the Washington Redskins, his former teammates in Philadelphia accused McNabb of disrespecting them. When McNabb was benched by his new team, he said the coach was disrespecting him. In baseball, the respect thing has become so twisted that if a player hits a home run, it is deemed disrespectful to the pitcher to linger near home plate for a second or two and celebrate. The next time he’s at the plate he might get beamed. Edgar Renteria, who plays for the San Francisco Giants, said the team showed him “total disrespect” by offering him only a million dollars to play in 2011. Even gang members are in on it. When speaking about what incites gang violence in Oakland, the police lieutenant explained, “It is usually some form of disrespect or inferred disrespect. (WSJ, June 9, 2011).

As children, most of us were taught that, like a good reputation, you had to earn respect, and once you had it, you could easily lose it by what you said or did. Somewhere along the line, however, that notion was turned on its head and respect is now something everyone demands irrespective of behavior. As Americans, we are guaranteed “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” Respect is not on that list, but we’ve come to think of it as a right. And the thing is, those most demanding respect are often the least deserving of it. If you have to demand respect, chances are good you’ve not earned it.

In our text, the chief priests and scribes are going after Jesus. They’ve already decided to kill him; it’s only a question of how to pull it off. Meanwhile, they are harassing him every chance they get. They come in clusters, and that emboldens them to grumble and interrupt and ask distracting questions. They exaggerate their disapproval with loud, heavy sighs and visible agitation. They are a major nuisance.

How does Jesus respond? He doesn’t demand their respect. Instead, he tells a story. It’s a parable about an absentee landowner who plants a vineyard and entrusts it to

some local tenants. This was a common practice. Wealthy people of Jerusalem often diversified their portfolios by investing in agriculture. In fact, it's quite possible some of these chief priests themselves were absentee owners of vineyards.

In any event, it's an enormous investment the owner is making. First there's the purchase price of the land and taxes and the cost of the plants and livable wages for tenants. It takes about four years for a new vineyard to produce, so for a long time there are all these big numbers in the expense column and nothing but zero's in the income column. The text says, "When the season for fruit [finally] drew near, he sent his servants to the tenants to get his fruit." This is not unreasonable. What is unreasonable is the reaction of the tenants. One of the servants they beat up. Another they kill. Another they stone. So what does this landowner do? He keeps sending servants.

The parable has departed from reality, right? A real land owner would not do that. He would demand real, swift and decisive justice. But this isn't a real owner. He's part of a story, and so, unlike a real owner, he just keeps sending servants. Unreal things like that happen in parables, just as trees talk in Disney films. So the servants in the parable come back with cracked ribs, swollen eyes and broken noses . . . or they don't come back at all because they're dead. So what does this owner do? He decides to send his son. "They will respect my son" he says. (There's that word: "respect".) "They will respect my son." What father would do such a thing?! And what son, after witnessing such things would say, "Sure dad. Send me! I'd be happy to go." The tenants, of course, throw the son out of the vineyard and kill him.

General rule of thumb: when a parable of Jesus departs from reality like this, it's not because Jesus was an unskilled story teller. He's stretching the parable to its breaking point in order to make a point. We should start asking, "What is he saying with this unreality? What's the message here?" The answer: how wicked the tenants, and how patient and longsuffering the landowner!

Even as the owner has sent wave after wave of servants who are ignored, beaten and killed, so God kept sending prophets who were ignored, beaten and killed. And then he sends his son. It makes me think of Hebrews 1:1, "In many and various ways, God spoke to His people of old by the prophets. But now in these latter days, He has spoken to us by His Son." What did we do? We killed him. We (sinful humanity) took him outside the vineyard (outside Jerusalem) and killed him. He deserved worship and praise, the highest form of respect we can give. But we crucified him instead, the most shameful form of execution available. Sinful humanity could not tolerate the humble, holy presence of the Son of God.

Remember Jesus is telling this parable to the religious authorities. The chief priests know the parable is about them and their plans. And Jesus also knows what they will do. One day soon, they're going to take him out back and execute him.

So the religious authorities do not like this parable, but they did recognize the image of the vineyard. It's already there in Isaiah 5, (today's Old Testament lesson) where we hear of a vineyard that has everything it needs. Still it's producing precious little fruit. And with the Gospel lesson, Jesus is saying it's still happening. God has every right to expect fruit from his people, but for one reason or another, he's not receiving it.

What is this fruit? Repentance and faith, good works, witness and evangelism, service of the neighbor and the like. But the vineyards have been failing for centuries now.

What's really wrong with those tenants in the Gospel lesson? Somehow, they got it into their heads that they are not really tenants anymore. They think they own the place. After all, by the sweat of their brow they tended to the vines. They're the ones with the calluses on their hands, not the owner. They're the ones who have been out their day and night, not the owner. They're the ones who tilled and watered and weeded. Clearly they think that makes them the rightful owners. We do that too. What I have is mine. I earned it. We may say everything belongs to God; few of us believe it. Fewer still live it.

What about you? Where's the fruit? The owner of the vineyard has made quite an investment in you. He knit you together. You are fearfully and wonderfully made. He has provided for you all that you need to sustain this body and life. He has defended you against dangers unknown, and guards and protects you from the kind of evil that you can only imagine. He has sent his Son to redeem you, to purchase and win you from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil. He has called you by the Gospel, enlightened you with his gifts. And now he's come looking for fruit. He's waited long enough. It's the season for fruit. What do you have for him?

In the parable, after the tenants kill the son, Jesus asks his listeners, "What will the owner do to those tenants?" They answer, "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." The religious authorities pronounce their own sentence. This parable anticipates the movement of the gospel from the Jews to the Gentiles.

I think it anticipates what is happening in our own era too. There are always others to whom God can give the vineyard. The gravitational center of Christianity has migrated away from the Northern and Western hemispheres to the Southern and Eastern hemispheres. If some tenants are not producing the fruit he expects, there are always others available.

It happens at the congregational level too. As in the parable, we can forget we are tenants and start imagining ourselves the owners. Pastors and teachers also can forget they are here to serve and come to think the church exists to meet their needs, namely for secure, if not untouchable jobs. Congregational leaders deceive themselves with thoughts of power and influence and forget it's about service. Similarly, we all have of a myriad of things we want from a church, things we think a church should provide, and we forget that God's Church is first and foremost about Word and Sacrament.

Again, if we are not producing the fruit he expects, there are always other tenants to which God can entrust the vineyard.

One last thing: The most unrealistic part of a parable is usually the part that Jesus wants us to remember. The most unrealistic part of this parable is the patience of the owner. He does not easily give up on his tenants. He keeps sending servants. He keeps giving the tenants another chance. In the same way he will not easily give up on us. In 2 Peter 3, we are reminded the Day of the Lord will come. "The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promises as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any

should perish, but that all should repent” and be saved (v. 9). It seems the owner has more respect for us tenants than we have for him. He has higher expectations of us than we have of ourselves. He seems to think we can produce good fruit for him.

Not one of us can say we have given him all the fruit he expects. We’ve fallen short on that count. Yet God’s Son Jesus Christ died on a cross outside of Jerusalem, outside the vineyard, and the good fruit of his cross is for us. The fruit we haven’t produced for him, he has produced for us. And he *gives* it to us today, right here [Lord’s Supper]. It’s the fruit of his grace. The good fruit we need the most, the fruit of the cross, is right here, for us tenants, for the forgiveness of our sins. Thanks be to God. Amen.