

The Green Hill Presbyterian Church
October 4, 2026 – Table Copy

SILENT PREPARATION: The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul; the decrees of the LORD are sure, making wise the simple; the precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the LORD is clear, enlightening the eyes; the fear of the LORD is pure, enduring forever; the ordinances of the LORD are true and righteous altogether. — Psalm 19:7-9

CALL TO WORSHIP *(Please join responsively)*

Leader: The God who frees us invites us to worship. The God of law welcomes our loyal response.

People: **The heavens are telling the glory of God. The firmament proclaims God's handiwork.**

Leader: God is present with us, eager to speak to us. Our Creator is here to test us and to keep us from sin.

People: **The law of God is perfect, reviving the soul. God's decrees are sure, making wise the simple.**

Leader: We tremble before God, yet are not afraid. We are ready to listen to God's Word.

People: **May our awe before God be pure and enduring. May our thoughts and our words be acceptable to God.**

PRAYER OF INVOCATION *(Unison)*

O God, our Rock and our Redeemer, enlighten us this day through the ongoing witness of your faithful people. Lead us to desire the guidance of your Word. Remind us of your ordinances that are true and righteous altogether. May they shape our living and warn us when we are in error. We seek to honor your name, to divest ourselves of idols, to keep this day of worship and rest. Work in us to develop right relationships in our families, and with all your children near and far. We pray in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

Worship Assistant

Amazing God, whose presence among us has been revealed so dramatically in Jesus of Nazareth, the Cornerstone of your Church: Speak to us this day through the reading – and hearing – of your Word. By your master plan, fit us together into a beautiful witness to your grace, that resurrection power may energize us for service, and bring an overflowing blessing to all your children. Amen.

FIRST SCRIPTURE READING Isaiah 51:1-7

*Our first reading – from Isaiah invites us to reflect on justice,
and on justice and righteousness.
But the text does not say what injustice is – or what justice should be –
except to contrast justice with violence,
and righteousness with a cry of pain.
That openness, however, can become a challenge –
to reflect on the meaning of justice,
to fill in the blanks from our own day and time....*

I will sing for my beloved my love song concerning his vineyard:
My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill.
He dug it and cleared it of stones and planted it with choice vines;
he built a watchtower in the midst of it,
and hewed out a wine vat in it;
he expected it to yield grapes, but it yielded rotten grapes.
And now, inhabitants of Jerusalem and people of Judah,
judge between me and my vineyard.
What more was there to do for my vineyard that I have not done in it?
When I expected it to yield grapes, why did it yield rotten grapes?
And now I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard.
I will remove its hedge, and it shall be devoured;
I will break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down.
I will make it a wasteland; it shall not be pruned or hoed,
and it shall be overgrown with briars and thorns;
I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it.
For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts is the house of Israel,
and the people of Judah are his cherished garden;
he expected justice, but saw bloodshed;
righteousness but heard a cry!

SECOND SCRIPTURE READING Matthew 21:33-46

Our second reading comes from Matthew's Gospel. Jesus' first interaction with the chief priests and elders – earlier in chapter 21 – unfolds according to a rabbinic practice – answering a question with another question – and – then – using the original questioner's response to determine the answer to the original question. Jesus then goes on to tell two parables – of which our reading is the second. And, after each, he invites the insight of his listeners – before adding his own teaching point – in each case, indicting his listeners.

Jesus is speaking.....

"Listen to another parable.

There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it,
dug a winepress in it, and built a watchtower.

Then he leased it to tenants and went away.

When the harvest time had come,
he sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his produce.

But the tenants seized his slaves and beat one, killed another, and stoned another.

Again he sent other slaves, more than the first,
and they treated them in the same way.

Then he sent his son to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.'

But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves,
'This is the heir; come, let us kill him – and get his inheritance.'

So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him.

Now, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?"

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."

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'?"

"Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you,
and given to a people that produces its fruits.

The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces,
and it will crush anyone on whom it falls."

When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables,
they realized that he was speaking about them.

They wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowds,
because they regarded him as a prophet.

SERMON

“What’s Going On in the Vineyard?”

What’s going on in the vineyard?

Like much of the news these days,
the world described in this parable
is one of violence, premeditated murder, and greed.

And – in the parable – there is no hint of a happy ending:
Slaves have been beaten, abused, killed....
And, the landowner’s son lies dead –
fallen between the rows of grapevines....

Perhaps worse yet:
The next chapter of the novel – as it is foretold –
involves revenge and more violence.

And, Jesus tells this cautionary tale without ambiguity, and without apology.

Those who kill the landowner's slaves – and son –
will be obliterated,
and the land given to others.

As a parable of the kingdom,
this text’s ties to the fate of the prophets are obvious.

The land owner’s slaves – the Hebrew prophets –
were sent only to be stoned and killed.

Jeremiah was flogged – and put in stocks – for his prophesy.

And , the book of Nehemiah details
how the people grew disobedient,
rebelled against God,
disregarded the law,
and killed God’s prophets.

The fact is that – over and over again –
the people are given opportunity to give God what is God's.

And – over and over again –
the people fail to recognize their proper place – in relationship to God.

But – nevertheless – God refuses to give up,
sending the Son,
in hopes that perhaps he will elicit a proper response.

But – even the Son – they kill.

Nothing will turn the hearts of the tenants –
tenants who are determined to take what does not belong to them.

Jesus – then – closes, by quoting Isaiah.

And – so – the chief priests and Pharisees
realize that Jesus is – quite specifically –
talking about them.

The Scriptures – they know so well – indict them.

And yet – even given that knowledge –
they prepare to do what those wicked tenants do:

They plot to kill the son.

Indeed, nothing will turn the hearts
of tenants determined to take what does not belong to them.

Power, money, land, and authority will be theirs –
no matter what they must do to seize it.

But, what about the other hearers of this parable?

What about the crowds, and the disciples?

How do they hear this disturbing word?

And what about us – and our role as hearers?

Who are we in these verses?

Pharisees and chief priests?

Disciples?

Members of the crowd?

In these events –

events that feel ripped out of “Game of Thrones” –

or the “Hunger Games” –

what is the word of the Lord for us?

We may need to start with *who we are not* in this setup.

That is – no matter whether we are a Pharisee, crowd member, or disciple –

we are not the land owner,

and we are not the son.

In other words, the vineyard –

so lovingly created, and entrusted to the tenants –

does not belong to us.

That is lesson number one:

We do not own anything on this earth.

It's all on loan – leased to us – for a period of time.

But – no matter who the tenants are –

if they occupy the land long enough,

they will start to feel entitled to it.

They will start to decide who can live on it – and who can not.

They will become upset with anyone who builds a house too close to it.

They will not want to give up the harvest,

or – even – the land.

And, they will do whatever it takes
to retain what *is not* theirs to begin with.

But – as the Psalmist has written --
The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it. (Psalm 24:1)

And God is going to call us – as human beings – to account:
to account for how we have tended to the vineyards
that have been entrusted to us.

Lesson number two
is that we often mistreat the very ones who God sends.

That is – if we count ourselves among the religious, righteous insiders –
we rarely heed the message of the prophets.

We have difficulty hearing prophetic voices –
voices telling us what God truly requires.

Rob Saler – executive director of the Center for Pastoral Excellence
at Christian Theological Seminary,
in Indianapolis –
gave a lecture on Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

And – in it – he included a brief discussion
from Bonhoeffer's book – *Christ the Center*.

Saler summarized Bonhoeffer's argument this way:

“Christ is at the center of the church's life,
but [in community life] Christ is found at the margins.

“Therefore, the church's center must be the margins.”

And so, Pharisees – then and now –
will want to kill the son –
rather than follow him to the margins.

In other words,
if the Word of God is spoken most clearly and loudly in the margins,
then those at the center
will do everything in their power to silence it.

And if – perhaps – we find ourselves unwilling to hear those voices,
then we – also – must realize that Jesus is talking about us.

Lesson three is that God's law is to be followed:
Jesus came to fulfill the law;
not to abolish it.

And – therefore – we are held accountable
when we disobey what God has commanded.

As with the tenants in this parable,
disregard of the law results in consequences.

Not only that, but – as followers of Jesus Christ –
we are to have an *expansive understanding* of God's law,
not a diminished one.

And so it is that John Calvin's reading of the Ten Commandments –
includes not only what the command commends –
or condemns –
but also the implications for those admonitions.

Calvin writes:
“For it is not enough for us to refrain from following all strange gods.

“... On the contrary – if we really want to keep this commandment –
true religion must have first place in us.”

Of the eighth commandment – “You shall not steal” –
he writes:

“The summary then is that He forbids us
to try and draw someone else’s goods to ourselves,
and therefore He commands us to work faithfully
to preserve for each one what belongs to him.

“... We will obey this commandment
if we always have the goal of helping each one
preserve what is his ...

“Not only that, when we see some people in poverty,
let us share in their need
and help them in their necessity by our abundance.”

Or – as Jesus said – we are to “love our neighbor as we love ourselves.”

That is, we are to welcome, share with, and work for the well-being
of landowner, fellow tenant, and slave alike.

Friends, no matter who we are in this story –
Pharisee, disciple, or crowd –
the vineyard does not belong to us.

All that we have is on loan.

We are merely entrusted with its care –
and obligated to turn over its bounty –
to the one who planted, dug, put up the fence,
and installed the wine press.

No matter who we are in the story –
Pharisee, disciple, or crowd –
we need to recognize how often
we fail to hear – and to heed –
God’s message and God’s messengers.

We must not seek to silence the Word –
the Word that calls us away from the comfortable place –
the place in which we are the center.

And – no matter who we are in the story –
Pharisee, disciple, or crowd –
we are to obey God's law,
fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

We are to emulate the One who teaches us –
not only to love those who love us –
but to bless those who persecute us,
to go the extra mile,
to give our coat and our shirt.

Indeed, planting a vineyard is like planting for a relationship.

And, planting a vineyard is a long-term investment,
a labor that will not yield its grapes,
and – more importantly – its wine,
for several years.

The wine produced is not essential for our personal, day-to-day, survival –
after all, we could live without wine.

But wine does give cheer to our hearts –
it gives great pleasure.

And, similarly – Jesus says –
there is great joy in heaven
over one sinner who repents.

(Luke 15:7, 10)

Well – when the landowner finally returns – what does he do?

Put those wretched rebels to death –
as suggested by the people at whom Jesus is aiming this parable?

No....

Take over production and distribution himself?

No....

Rather, he will lease the vineyard to other tenants --
tenants who will -- presumably --
turn the produce -- the fruit --
over to the landowner at harvest time.

How -- then -- shall we be these "other tenants"?

That is our only relevant question.

How shall we become -- how shall we be --
"people that produce the fruits of the kingdom"?

How shall we become -- and remain -- such fruitful tenants?

Let those questions define our purpose.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit: *Amen.*
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AFFIRMATION OF FAITH (*Unison*)

We confess and acknowledge that the law of God is most just, equal, holy, and perfect, commanding those things which -- when perfectly done -- can give life and bring us to eternal happiness. But our nature is so corrupt, weak, and imperfect that we are never able to perfectly fulfill the works of the law. Even after we are reborn, if we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth of God is not in us.

It is therefore essential for us to lay hold on Christ Jesus, in his righteousness and his atonement, since he is the end and consummation of the Law and since it is by him that we are set at liberty so that the curse of God may not fall upon us. For as God the Father beholds us in the body of his Son Christ Jesus, he accepts our imperfect obedience as if it were perfect and covers our works -- as deficient as they are -- with the righteousness of his Son. Thanks be to God! Amen.

PRAYER OF DEDICATION (*Unison*)

Ruler of all time and space, we want to be faithful stewards in your vineyard. Our lives are in your hands. All that we have is yours. Help us to use well all that we here devote to the work of your church. May we help bring your kingdom here on earth – because you hold first place in our priorities, and our daily goal is to serve you. Amen.

CHARGE AND BENEDICTION

As we go forth this day,
may we resolve to be those “other tenants” –
those who produce the “fruits of the kingdom....”

And let us receive the Lord’s Benediction:

May the Lord bless us, and keep us.

May the Lord be gracious to us.

May the Lord lift up the light of his countenance upon us,
and give us peace;
both now, and in the life everlasting.

Amen.

BENEDICTION RESPONSE

God be with you till we meet again;
May the life with God you’re weaving
Spread the wonder of believing:
God be with you till we meet again.