



October 4, 2020
Matthew 21
Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Pastor Chris Marien
Ascension Lutheran Church

Changing the Rules

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus, the Christ. Amen.

When I served as an intern in Hawaii. In Hawaii, I spent half my time at a retirement home working with a group of people that spanned from just retired at 65 all the way to the very end of life. One woman, named Doris, who found me to be an ear to listen if nothing else, was a fanatic for Scrabble. And every Wednesday we would play Scrabble with two other ladies. However, this was no ordinary game of Scrabble. At the first game they each pulled out their own rule book for the game and placed that on one side of themselves and on the other side from purse or handbag or bag attached to their walker they pulled out dictionary after dictionary—five to be exact—just to check their own words they assured me.

After my second turn and with every turn after that I noticed that when I laid down a word that they did not seem to agree with all three of them would flip through their dictionary until they found the word and assured me it was a good choice and worth at least a small number of points. This was the big time and I tried my very best to keep up. However, Doris, who had originally invited me, was the keeper of the board and all of its tiles. A fine responsibility, except in this case, of Doris. She had the first stages of dementia and in those first stages she had a perfect memory but her fight or flight response was more enhanced than most of the residents. And at the first sign of a disagreement she would either challenge with anger and tell them to leave the game or simply pick up the board game pieces and all and walk to the elevator and go back to her room. Well this happened one too many times for one of the other ladies who lodged a formal complaint with the administrator who transferred keeper duties of the board from Doris to the second lady. And Doris was crushed, all of her responsibility taken away, rejected by the other two ladies and left to be alone, which in a retirement home can be deadly. Word moved around of the Scrabble incident and not to be outdone in this power play—Doris solved her problem--she went out and bought her own board and decided to get herself the title of board keeper once again. Doris changed the rules.

If only this life was that easy. If you are unhappy with the agreement – change what you want. Forget the handshake. Never mind the contract with your signature. Do as you please – you might even get away with your dishonesty and just maybe, maybe you will come out ahead. If I look at the world through the eyes of my faith in Jesus, I am convinced that our ability to “get away with something” seems to be the new mark of distinction in the world. Offered the vineyard to tend and to love and to enjoy – we have chosen instead to crush the beauty of the vineyard for our own wants and needs. Never mind the pain you may cause for your exploitation or manipulation – if you do not get caught, and sometimes even when you do get caught, you might still get away with whatever underhanded, though opportune, accomplishment to further your self-indulgent greed at the expense of others. If ever we needed to hear Jesus tell this story – today is the day.

Generation after generation God kept sending his servants to the vineyard. And the tenants in the vineyards kept changing the rules. Even though the tenants knew the rules, generation after generation those tenants changed the rules and the servants who were sent were beaten, treated shamelessly, wounded, and thrown out. How long should God put with tenants who treated his servants like that? How long should God tolerate their rejection, their brutality, their sloth, their thievery, their self-indulgence?

The parable is like no other Jesus has told. As one author writes, “It is the only one that contains his own obituary.” Imagine how Jesus must have felt as he told his followers of his fate. What profound grief. What pain

for the nation that had rejected him. Yet still, in spite of all the raw feelings churning inside him, the Savior was early to that courtyard, reaching out to the few vines that were reaching out to him. Clearing away the weeds that had overrun their lives. Feeding the roots that were struggling for deeper soil. Encouraging the budding fruit on their eagerly branching faith. All this the Savior did, knowing full well that in a few days the wicked tenants would throw him outside of the city walls and have him brutally killed. Such is his faithfulness to his Father's vineyard...and to those in it who are eager to grow.

I posted on Facebook last Tuesday in honor of National Coffee Day. I wrote the following. "Today was a very good day. Not only because it was National Coffee Day but because today I believe God offered me one invitation after another and I said yes to every one of them. Today was about being open to the movement of the Spirit instead of the push of the pandemic. God, I am grateful for this day. I do not post as often as I used to and honestly much of Facebook is a cesspool of negative energy and gnashing of teeth over any variety of topics. Yet, I was so struck by how God used me last Tuesday. I could not keep from telling someone else, or in the case of Facebook, hundreds of someone elses. I thought I was all done with last Tuesday – until someone left a comment on my post – sharing these words, "I think we all need days like this – thankful that you got one – enjoy!" My friend had no idea how those words rang true. If the pandemic has taught us anything about the vineyard God has given us to tend, the pandemic has taught us the challenge of living together - not in our own homes – though that may be true – but we have been taught how difficult it is to live together as one community for the good of the whole vineyard. And how very sad – to the point of despair – that we are so grateful for one day so good – when in the eyes of God every day is a good day. Every day is filled with moments of joy. Every day will reveal a moment of God's grace – God's presence – God's promise to us. Yet how easy it is for us to be overwhelmed – claim the label that we think will bring belonging to us – change the rules to fit the needs we think we have in this moment.

My friends – you are alive. And there are countless people, today, in this moment, who are grieving the loss of someone they love. How are you listening to God's voice? What is God inviting you to do in the vineyard? How might you tend the beauty of the vineyard in which you live? Truly, I am tired of the left and the right and the conservative and the liberal and the democrat and the republican. I am tired of our collective inability to walk alongside each other. I am tired of our need to be loved before we love. I am tired of our hunger to be right over our satisfaction to sit at the table together. And finally I am tired of the vineyard being more warzone than garden of Eden. And yet – it is up to each of us to decide how to wake up in the morning and walk into the world? Are you still alive to build-up or break down? Are you still alive to lift up or tear down? Are you still alive to bring the world together for the good of all or simply to prove yourself right? The choice is entirely yours.

Doris changed the rules. She bought her own scrabble board. The only problem, owning her new board, she was left with no one with which to play the game. Dear friends – Jesus tells the story of the tenants in the vineyard to remind us that the rules have always been the same. The owner of the vineyard promises us again and again the gift of life – the rules of the vineyard were only provided to help us live together so that the life we might live would be lived to the fullest. So how are you doing? Do you feel alive? Amen.