

“The Wise Choice”
Matthew 21:33—46

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"The good news of the Gospel is that the triune God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—creates, redeems, sustains, rules, and transforms all things and all people. This one living God, the Scriptures say, liberated the people of Israel from oppression and covenanted to be their God. By the power of the Spirit, this one living God is incarnate in Jesus Christ, who came to live in the world, die for the world, and be raised again to new life.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ announces the nearness of God's kingdom, bringing good news to all who are impoverished, sight to all who are blind, freedom to all who are oppressed, and proclaiming the Lord's favor upon all creation. The mission of God in Christ gives shape and substance to the life and work of the Church. In Christ, the Church participates in God's mission for the transformation of creation and humanity by proclaiming to all people the good news of God's love, offering to all people the grace of God at font and table, and calling all people to discipleship in Christ.

Human beings have no higher goal in life than to glorify and enjoy God now and forever, living in covenant fellowship with God and participating in God's mission.

Almighty God, who raised Jesus Christ from the dead and set him above all rule and authority, has given to him all power in heaven and on earth, not only in this age but also in the age to come. God has put all things under the Lordship of Jesus Christ and has made Christ Head of the Church, which is his body. The Church's life and mission are a joyful participation in Christ's ongoing life and work.

Christ calls the Church into being, giving it all that is necessary for its mission in the world, for its sanctification, and for its service to God. Christ is present with the Church in both Spirit and Word. Christ alone rules, calls, teaches, and uses the Church as he wills.

Christ gives to the Church its faith and life, its unity and mission, its order and discipline. Scripture teaches us of Christ's will for the Church, which is to be obeyed. In the worship and service of God and the government of the church, matters are to be ordered according to the Word by reason and sound judgment, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

In affirming with the earliest Christians that Jesus is Lord, the Church confesses that he is its hope, and that the Church, as Christ's body, is bound to his authority and thus free to live in the lively, joyous reality of the grace of God.

In Christ all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through Christ God reconciles all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of the cross (Col. 1:19–20). In Christ's name, therefore, the Church is sent out to bear witness to the good news of reconciliation with God, with others, and with all creation. In Christ the Church receives its truth and appeal, its holiness, and its unity."

Oh, by the way, that was a quote. Do you agree with it? Do you know where it is from? It is from the first chapter of the *PC(USA) Book of Order*. It is not about government; it is not about worship; it is not about discipline. It is about God, Jesus and the church—Christ's church of which Christ is the Foundation. The title of this first chapter is “The Foundations of Presbyterian Polity: The Mission of the Church.”

It might be helpful to remember that the parables which I have been preaching these last few weeks are all delivered by Jesus to the religious elite in Jerusalem. This section of Scripture begins with the triumphant entry of Jesus into Jerusalem—also known as Palm Sunday. From that event, Jesus goes to the temple, where he overturns the tables of the moneychangers in the courtyard. He then enters the temple and confronts the Pharisees and the priests with a series of parables that challenge their beliefs and their actions.

In our parable for this morning, we see an allegorical retelling of God's long relationship with the Jewish people. The landowner creates a garden, and turns it over to the people to care for and to live off of. When he sends his servants to collect that which is due him, they are attacked and even killed by the people. This is done several times—always with the same result. Finally, the landowner sends his son, believing the he will be respected by the people, but he, too, is killed.

How might this story be interpreted? God creates a world that is good. In that world, God creates a promised land for the Jewish people. God makes a covenant with the Jewish People, telling them that they are the Chosen People and that they will be treated as Chosen People. The only requirement is that they are obedient to God, that they follow the rules laid down by God, and that they worship that God exclusively. When they fail to do so, they are warned many times by many different servants of God. They are told that they must return to the covenant that their ancestors made with God. When they refuse to do that, God sends his Son to remind them of them of God's great love for them. They refuse even this plea, rejecting the Son, and returning to their evil ways.

What I believe is the most interesting part of this Scripture is what happens just after Jesus finishes the parable. He ask the religious leaders what they think might happen next. They say 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.” It is the religious leaders, not Jesus, who condemns the tenants, thereby condemning themselves.

Then Jesus quotes Isaiah and Psalms, "The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord's doing, and it is amazing in our eyes." Jesus once again condemns the religious leaders. "You are the keepers of the faith, and even you don't recognize the foundation upon which your faith has been built."

However, Jesus recognizes that he is, indeed, the cornerstone, the foundational stone, the stone which aligns the entire foundation of faith in the One True God. However, the religious leaders have chosen to reject the cornerstone, in favor of a faith which gives them control over the people. Jesus warns them that their very choice will be their downfall.

We, too, are presented with choices every day. Some simple and some difficult: what to wear, what to buy, what to eat, which direction to go, what decision to make, etc. Sometimes we have a variety of choices that are all appealing, and we have a difficult time making a decision. At other times, none of the choices presented to us are particularly appealing, so we are required to accept "the lesser of two evils." We look at the unattractive offerings, and we say, "Isn't there another option?"

We, as individuals and as a church, also have choices. We can choose a faith of our own making, over which we have control. Or, we can give up our control, and we can trust in the faith offered to us by God through Jesus Christ. As Presbyterians, we proclaim Jesus Christ as the foundation of our faith, but we don't always act as if that were true. Over the next few months, as we attempt to discern more deliberately just who we are, we will also be defining whose we are, who we will serve, and how we will serve. You will each have a choice to make in that process. May that choice be made prayerfully. AMEN.