

**Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Watertown, WI**

“O Wondrous Love, What Have You Done?”

Rev. David K. Groth

April 3, 2022

“Then the owner of the vineyard said, ‘What shall I do? I will send my beloved son; perhaps they will respect him’”
(Lk. 20:13).

Disrespected. It’s become the go-to-word for anyone who feels slighted or overlooked. In 2021, when so many people quit their jobs that it became known as the “Great Resignation”. Of those who quit fifty-seven percent listed being disrespected as a major reason for their resignations. Many NFL players right now are feeling disrespected because their teams didn’t offer the millions they believe they are worth. Next month, major league baseball pitchers will start feeling disrespected whenever the batter loiters around home plate following a homerun. An Oscar winning celebrity felt disrespected when a bad joke cut too close to home. Those who are part of the LGBTQ often feel disrespected. And it’s well known that gang violence is often incited by some form of disrespect or inferred disrespect.

As children, most of us were taught that, like a good reputation, you have to earn respect, and once you have it, you can easily lose it by the choices you make. 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 natural born right. If you have to demand respect, chances are good you’ve not earned it.

As Christians, I don’t think it’s our job to run around demanding respect. But we do show respect even to people who don’t deserve it, not as a reflection of their character, but as a reflection of ours, and of Jesus Christ, whose name we bear.

In our text, the chief priests and scribes are going after Jesus. They’ve 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. With their body language they exaggerate their disapproval, and they grumble to one another just loud enough for people to hear their mumbling, but not loud enough for the crowd to make out the words. They are a major nuisance.

How does Jesus respond? He doesn’t demand their respect. (In fact, He never does that.) Instead, he tells a little 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, who are watering, weeding, pruning, building trellises and fences. It takes about four years for a new vineyard before it begins to produce. So, for a long time there are all these hefty numbers in the expense column and nothing but zeroes in the income column. The text says, “When the season for fruit [finally] drew near, he sent his servant to the tenants so that they would give him some of the fruit of the vineyard.” This is not unreasonable. What is unreasonable is the reaction of the tenants. They beat the guy up and send him away empty-handed. The owner sends another servant and they do the same to him, as well as treat him shamefully. That is, they add insult to the violence. The owner tries yet again with the same results. There’s a crescendo of abuse. The servants in the parable come back with cracked ribs and concussions and broken noses, but they don’t come back with any fruit. What does this owner do? “I will send my beloved son. Perhaps they will respect him.” (There’s that word: “respect”.) After disrespecting three servants he says, “Perhaps they will respect my son.”

What landowner would do this? A real landowner would see to it that there would be swift and decisive justice. But this isn’t a real landowner. He’s part of a parable, 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. And when a parable of Jesus departs from reality, that’s the time to lean in and start asking what’s really going on here. What’s the meaning of this and how does it relate to us?

So let’s lean in. The owner is God, the vineyard is God’s people who are expected to produce fruit, the tenants are the religious leaders, the servants are the prophets and the beating of the servants symbolizes Israel’s rejection of the prophets. The beloved son, of course, is Jesus.

Just what did those tenants expect when they signed-on for this labor? Did they begin with good intentions which then diminished over time? Since they were working so hard over those first years, did they forget they were servants and started thinking themselves the owners? Or, did they conclude the landowner was a softy and would just let it go? Did they mistake his physical absence for indifference? Did they mistake his patience for apathy or forgetfulness?

Do we ever do these things? Do we as workers in the vineyard forget that we are servants and begin to think that for all our work the church belongs to us? Do we ever disrespect the servants God duly sends? Or do we ever think the owner of the vineyard (the Lord our God) is a softy and will throw a blind eye to our appalling behavior and bad choices? Do we ever mistake God's visible absence for indifference? Do we ever mistake His patience for apathy or forgetfulness? Do we ever think he's too distracted with big-time problems elsewhere (like what's happening in Ukraine) to be concerned about what's happening in our little vineyard? Do we, as the vineyard of God, having everything we need, still fail to produce the fruit He can reasonably expect from us? Does God ever look at you and me and ask, "What more could I have done for my vineyard than I have done for it. When I looked for good grapes, why did it yield only bad?" (Is. 5:4).

The part of a parable that is most unrealistic is the part we need to remember. The most unrealistic part of this parable is the patience and long-suffering of the owner of the vineyard. So we need to remember this patience. God will not easily give up on us or our children, our neighbors, our country. He keeps sending servants. He keeps giving the tenants another chance to change their minds.

In the Old Testament, we see how God kept sending His prophets, one after another. Even though they were beaten and rejected and abused and even killed, he keeps sending more. It's not because he views the lives of the prophets cheaply. It's because he so treasures the lives of His people. He counts them worthy of the sacrifices of His prophets. Though we His people are disrespectful toward Him, using His name in vain, worshipping other Gods, ignoring the Sabbath Day, still God treats us with the highest respect. He even sends His beloved Son. "Perhaps they will respect my son" he says. It makes me think of Hebrews 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."

And don't forget, the Son agreed to go! Neither the Father nor the Son is naïve. They saw what happened to the prophets. They know what the tenants are capable of. They know where this is leading. And yet the Son agrees to go.

From the hymn, "A Lamb Goes Uncomplaining Forth" in verse 2 the Father says, "'Go forth, My Son and free My children from their dread Of guilt and condemnation. The wrath and stripes are hard to bear, But by Your passion they will share The fruit of Your salvation.'" Then, verse 3, the Son responds, "'Yes, Father, yes, most willingly I'll bear what You command Me . . . I'll do what You have asked Me.'"

It's not naivety that prompts the Father to send His Son. It's love. Again from the hymn, "O wondrous Love, what have You done!" (LSB 438). It's love that compels these actions. "God so loved the world that he sent His only begotten Son." It's not naivety that prompts the Son to go willingly into harms way. It's love. Jesus said, "Greater love has no man than this, that he lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends" (Jn. 15:13).

In the parable and in our lives, the vineyard owner doesn't easily give up. 2 Peter 3, "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).

One last thing. In the Old Testament lesson, the vineyard owner does everything required for his vineyard, yet when He comes looking for good fruit from His people, there's little to be found. See yourself in the Old Testament lesson, as a vine that has everything it could possibly need but has still failed to produce that good fruit that can be expected.

In the Gospel lesson, the servants figure since they've done all the work, the vineyard and it's produce really belongs to them. See yourself in the Gospel too, as a tenant who thinks he owns the place, has earned the place, and therefore doesn't need to give any of it back to the real owner.

Finally, and most importantly, see yourself as one to whom the owner of the vineyard sent His Son. He sent His Son not naively, but in love. And in love, His Son agreed to come. In love for you, the Son laid down His life on a cross.

And from the tree of the cross there sprouts good fruit, the best fruit, the fruit we need the most. This fruit we haven't produced for him, he produces it for us. This fruit we don't harvest and give to Him. No, this fruit, He gives to us . . . today . . . right here [Lord's Supper]. It's the fruit of his grace, his body and his blood, for the nourishment of our bodies and of our souls. It's also for our forgiveness, and for our salvation. The most important fruit He produces Himself and gives it to us here . . . today. Thanks be to God. Amen.