

Sermon – Matthew 21:33-46  
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Grace Lutheran Church  
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### “The Grapes of Rath”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace in the name God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. It’s not a corner of the internet in which I spend a lot of time, but when there, it’s usually pretty funny. The genre, broadly speaking, is one of unmet expectations. “What I ordered vs. what I got” is one common thread, videos of people sharing website pictures of what they ordered, followed with often hilarious pictures or videos of what they actually received. Better yet is the subgenre of recipes gone wrong and kitchen fails. Truly, this is one time when I wish we had video screens so that I could share some examples. If you’re interested, google “Easter lamb cakes gone wrong” and you’ll have an idea of what I’m talking about. Seriously, you can do it right now. I don’t even mind! Talk about unmet expectations. These people started out with a recipe, the right ingredients, and the best intentions. They ended up with something troubling. Of course, unmet expectations can be a good thing. Most of us, I think, expected the Bears to lose again on Thursday. Instead, they looked like a football team! But usually, unmet expectations are cause for deep disappointment.
2. Such is certainly the case for the Lord when it comes to the people of Israel and Judah as we pick up the story with Isaiah. God, humming a tune with hands in the dirt, lovingly does all that is needed for the peoples’ well-being. God finds fertile soil and clears it of stone; plants choice vines and builds a watchtower. What God orders is grapes, but wild grapes are delivered. The

- recipe should have yielded justice and righteousness. What God gets from the people is a cry of bloodshed. In response to the wickedness found in Judah, the Lord removes the hedge of protection around them. While it would take more than another century, the Southern Kingdom is finally be overrun by the Babylonians. God lets the people suffer the consequences of their actions.
3. We find ourselves in a world not too different from the one occupied by Isaiah. Look around the vineyard. God planted vines of paradise, but we have brought forth wild grapes of climate destruction. God planted vines of abundance, but we have reaped wild grapes of inequality and poverty. God planted vines of equality, all created in God's image, but we see the too-plentiful wild grapes of prejudice and hate. God planted vines of peace, but the wild grapes of war continue to spill forth – now, once more, in the Holy Land as war erupts again in Israel and Palestine. God planted choicest vines and expected justice and righteousness. How's it going? Bloodshed and a cry. How long, O Lord? How long?
  4. When my brother and I were kids, we'd often play in the basement, battling at the ping pong table or duking it out on our Atari 2600. When things got a bit heated between us, cries rising through the floorboards above us, we might hear one or the other of our parents yell out, "Don't make me come down there!" The implication being, of course, that if we didn't get our act together, they make us get our act together. And it worked, at least for a moment. Jesus picks up Isaiah's brokenhearted love song and enters into it as a parable. Successive waves of servants have been rebuffed – beaten, stoned, killed. But surely if the landowner's son shows up, the people will fall in line. The son is as good as the landowner, not just representing him but truly making him present. Surely, they will listen. Sadly, they do not. The Son is put to death, the tenants thinking they can make the vineyard their own forever through full-on rebellion. Even the chief priests and the elders, who know full well that Jesus is calling them out, know what the proper response is to the

- rebel tenants. They should be put to a miserable death. Once the grapes have gone bad, is there anything left but wrath?
5. The end of the parable, however, is not the end of the story. Thank God. Jesus, mired here in a fight about authority with the priests and elders, is in the last week of his life. He, the Son who came down to the basement, into the vineyard, can see what's coming. He has not been listened to. Jesus will be put to death. Then we be rid of him forever. Finally and fully rejected, maybe God will just leave us alone, running wild and headlong toward our own destruction. But out of the parable comes prophecy. Jesus, quoting Psalm 118, shows himself forth as the rejected stone that will be laid as the new foundation. While this world is overrun by sin and brokenness, while we live with the sorrow of unmet after unmet expectation, God has not given up on us. The vineyard still belongs to its loving Lord. The One once rejected has been raised, the cross of death become the tree of life in the midst of an ever-flowering vineyard with Christ at its center. Instead of acting finally with wrath, God builds upon Christ a new rath. I know y'all thought that was a typo, right? A no-"w" rath is actually a walled enclosure built by ancient Irish lords. In this new rath, God builds up sturdy walls around the vineyard, not to keep people out or to separate by gender, color, or class, but instead to fulfill the original creative intent. God, the loving landowner, we the faithful tenants striving to do God's will, all together, with justice and righteousness, in the rath of God that is nothing but grace, all the way down.
  6. We tried once to be rid of the Son, but it's hard to keep a God-man down. Our expectations are not met, but far surpassed. The stone has crushed our old selves in the water of baptism; we are the new people to whom the Kingdom is forever given. Since we cannot be rid of Christ, let us worship him, echoing in our songs the love song of the Father for us. Amen.

And now may that peace that passes all understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.