Grace and Peace from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

In last week’s parable of the Two Sons, Jesus tells the religious leaders what is most important - it is not who has the authority or by whose authority one acts but instead whether one does God’s will. Doing the will of God is more important than answering the question “who is God?’. The first parable doesn’t seem to sink in, so Jesus does what any teacher or Rabbi would do, they cover the subject again this time with another parable. That is why the parable of the Wicked Tenants also addresses the challenge posed by the religious leaders about the source of Jesus’ authority.

When talking about a vineyard the people of the time understood in their setting Roman occupied Palestine a landowner would set up a vineyard complete with a wine press, a watchtower and fenced in area. Now the vineyard was ready for the tenants to lease this vineyard. Many of the landowners were absentee landowners and may have lived in another country quite a distance from the vineyard. For this to work, the tenants leased the vineyard and were then left in charge of overseeing the productivity of the vineyard. Then at harvest time, they would pay the owner at harvest time with a share of the produce. This arrangement goes on in our modern world where in tenant farming the tenant receives a large percentage of the produce, less their living expenses. The absence of cash led to the creation of this type of farming. High interest rates, unpredictable harvests, and unscrupulous landlords and merchants often kept tenant farm families severely indebted, requiring the debt to be carried over until the next year or the next. The tenant farming in the ancient world, on the other hand worked well for all concerned - except-----in the case of today’s parable, when the slaves came to collect the landowners share of the produce they were attacked by the tenants who beat one, killed one and stoned another. So, the landowner, not experiencing this situation in the past, sent other slaves who ending up being treated the same way. So, the landowner thought if he sent his son they would respect him and give him the share of the produce. He was wrong once again. One could argue if this made sense since they had already treated those tried to collect the landowners fair share badly, including killing one of them. Regardless, he sends his son but instead of respecting him they killed him thinking they might get his inheritance. When Jesus asked the leaders what the landowner should do to the tenants, they replied with the obvious answer that he should put them to a miserable death and rent out to tenants that will give him his produce at harvest time.

The answer is a matter of perspective. The religious leaders most likely see themselves as the landowner, caught in his own merciful response to those in his charge. Because of their position they are able own land, and to have others manage it for them while they were busy with their administrative tasks in Jerusalem. The servants are their subordinates and they would view themselves as the real victims of the unscrupulous tenants. Therefore, they are ready and even eager to pronounce judgment on them - a miserable death to the tenants, replacing them with new tenants.

From us Christians, allegorically we would read the parable seeing God as the landowner and the religious leaders as the thoroughly evil tenants who are defrauding God of the rightful fruits of God’s covenant with Israel. The groups of servants are Israel’s prophets and Jesus is the son. After all, isn’t that what happened to the prophets and Jesus? Perhaps neither allegory is the was to look at this parable.

Jesus is exerting his authority. when he asks them if they never read the scriptures as he says “The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone this was the Lord’s doing, and it is amazing in our eyes’?”

God has poured out gifts and blessings from the beginning, but humanity continues to abuse those gifts. We have been entrusted with a creation to care for, and in our shortsightedness, we abuse and pollute the earth, even bringing about the extinction of entire species. We abuse the gift of our bodies when we overindulge in food or alcohol or drugs. We have been given the ability to create so many wonderful things, and even this gift we abuse as we gather and keep as much as we can for ourselves.

This has been the history of people. In Isaiah’s time it was clear the people turned away from God’s gifts. While God expected righteousness and justice the people responded with bloodshed and suffering, turning away from God.

Even if you can think of all the ways you have not turned from God and all the ways you have been faithful, it does no good. As Paul reminds us in the reading from Philippians, “Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ”. Even all of Paul’s good and faithful acts add up to nothing. When Paul bragged he bragged Jesus. We therefore turn our attention to Jesus as we enter this season our focus will turn to stewardship. ” this gospel reading can be both a blessing and a curse. It can be a curse if we imagine that this passage is giving a dire warning to those who misuse resources. It can be a blessing when we see the passage as an opportunity to evaluate how and why we do the things we do with what God has given us. Dr. Michael Binder of Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota, is fond of saying, “Generosity is what God wants for us, not from us.” Just as Jesus is inviting the religious leaders, and us, into a more generous way of living we look to the future and respond by considering how we have been richly blessed and pass those blessings unto others.