My brothers and sisters in Christ, let us pray. Lord God of our hearts, minds, souls, and Spirits, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts always be acceptable in your sight, our strength and our redeemer, Amen.

In todays’ scripture which is Jesus’ parable, the “produce” was fine, but the delivery system was really messed up. The problem was not with the vineyard’s production but with the tenants themselves. These were extremely violent tenant farmers, slaughtering the various groups of slaves sent by the landowner. The rationale for their brutality and murderous ways was stated explicitly when the son visited: “This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance”. This sounds like the inner city, not the countryside.

Culturally, the leasing of land to tenant farmers was common in the first century. Landowners expected tenants to give them part of their crop, and those who failed to meet the landowner’s standards would be removed from the land, forcefully if necessary. Many in Jesus’ audience would have understood the experience of these farmers all too well. If they chose not to “pay” the landowner, as was the case in Jesus’ parable, the landowner would find easily find new tenants.

We Christians have tended to read the parable seeing God as the landowner and the temple leaders as the thoroughly evil tenants who are defrauding God of the rightful fruits of God’s covenant with Israel. In this allegory, the groups of servants are Israel’s prophets and Jesus is the son. All prophets are rejected of course.

One other note on the term “landowner” is in order. This is better translated as “household master”, and household masters were used a common analogy for God in Jesus’ teaching in Matthew’s Gospel. Within Jesus’ parables, household masters generally make wise decisions, even if misunderstood.

This kind of reading, though, lets us be the other future tenants to whom the “vineyard” will be given after it is taken from the Jerusalem leaders who have not managed it well. Christian pastors have long argued this as an allegory of victorious salvation history from Matthew’s perspective, even to the point of depicting Jesus, who would be crucified outside of Jerusalem, as the son who is killed outside of the vineyard. It is just one of many texts which historically justify violence against Jewish people and even against Judaism as a whole, and it’s really not healthy in terms of our faith and God’s love.

Jesus’ citation of Psalm 118 in verse 42 about the cornerstone that’s rejected does not rebut the verdict the leaders have pronounced on the tenants, but it refocuses the discussion. By inserting himself as the cornerstone Jesus gives rise to a totally new structure that we see as the Kingdom of God, which Jesus has been proclaiming from the beginning of his ministry and which the church continues to proclaim in Jesus’ name.

This passages’ focus, then, is rather on the futility of debates about, and maintenance programs for, the institutions of this age. We spend oodles of resources on how to hold onto power. It’s reflected in our spending as a nation-state and defense spending that outstrips the other top 10 nations’ defense spending combined. It’s reflected in our election cycles that remind us that anyone who hold different opinions from ours should not be trusted and eyed with suspicion that they don’t love the flag enough or will corrupt our children with new scientific breakthroughs and knowledge.

Power loves to hold onto power; that’s not politics. Politics is the acid rhetoric which divides people on how one side can hold onto power and subjugate the other. But let’s be clear: while both are this-world realities, neither power nor politics have a place in proclaiming the Kingdom of God.

We should understand that even as we venerate the past and its people who have helped build our church to where it is today, if those folks could talk they would ask us to remember them but look with confidence toward a future that includes every one of us sitting here, including our differences. So many institutions that are not the church want to denigrate the church for this reason, that we are too caught up with our definition of God it represents the possibility that we might have more in common than we think.

The terms of God’s relationship to God’s own people in this parable are new, for sure. But like all things God, they invite us forward from our collective past of venerated saints toward that unknown future in which we will be both blessed and judged. And it’s up to us to manage that tension without tearing our fellowship asunder.

I’ll leave you with these final thoughts.

Our parable does not use this “violence in the vineyard” story to set forth the surprising nature and qualities of God’s reign, as do so many others in the Gospels. I have come to believe that if our forebears could talk, their advice would be to focus on all things that are God, and the petty jealousies of *what we have* don’t matter compared to ***who we are***.

Why is God’s reign often compared to landowning activities? Is it simply Jesus’ theological belief that God “owns” all the land? In Jesus’ teaching, he consistently reminds us that only the Creator owns everything. Proper care and oversight of those people and things entrusted to us should receive fair hearing from this parable. We, too, are like those who wish to receive more credit for our labor, as if we “own” the “land.”

Yet we should remember that we are simply tenants leasing out the talents God has granted to be used for the greater good in the kingdom. Let’s remember that the household master and the son are watching, yes, but if we are faithful, they may be smiling alongside the saints of this church we hold so dear.

Thanks be to God, Amen.