Matthew 21: 33-46: The Reluctant Embrace

Happy October! Cooler nights, shorter days, and autumn chrysanthemums remind me that change is all around us. I love fall, yet part of me still longs for one more summer morning on the deck with coffee and birdsong. We often welcome change and resist it at the same time—what I call "the reluctant embrace."

Today's readings are also full of change. Isaiah describes Israel as a vineyard – a vineyare carefully planted by God, walled, watered and watched, with a vat built in it in expectation of a bountiful grape harvest. Instead of bearing good fruit, the grapes are rotten. God expected justice and righteousness. Instead, Israel is full of injustice and unrighteousness. Unless they have a change of heart and behavior, they will be destroyed. In his letter to the Philippians, Paul shows the joy of letting Christ reshape what matters most. The circumstances of his life that had been sources of great pride and prestige are now rubbish compared to the joy of knowing Christ. Having willingly embraced the challenge of knowing Jesus, having willingly changed his heart and his life, he has found his great treasure. Finally, Jesus's parable demonstrates to the religious leaders the ways in which they are bearing rotten fruit. They assumed they were the landowner's servants, the ones beaten and killed by the wicked tenants. Instead, Jesus says, they are the wicked tenants. Their pride and arrogance, their emphasis on the actions of worship without a corresponding attitude of worship, will result in the kingdom of God being stripped from them. The fruit they bear is rotten fruit.

Jesus calls us to bear the fruit of mercy, justice, and faithfulness. Our obedience to this call is seen in the visible fruit of our actions: for example, sharing our parking lot during the Honey Fest, supporting the food pantries that serve those who hunger, and in all the ways we individually and quietly serve our neighbors. We remain works in progress, asking where Christ is calling us to change and pressing on in faith. Our hope rests not in our ability to change ourselves, but in Jesus Christ—the rejected Son who became the cornerstone, who died and rose for us, and whose saving love never changes. Thanks be to God. Amen.