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Lent 5 – Luke 20:9-19 – Undisputed!

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By show of hands, how many of you believe that the Green Bay Packers are the greatest professional football franchise of all time? I assumed I would see a good amount of hands in the air, given that I asked that question in the state of Wisconsin. After all, the Packers have 13 world championships to their name, whereas the next best team only has 9. Green Bay is Titledown, right?! But how many hands do you think I would see in the air if I asked that same question at a church in Boston or Chicago, for example? Not nearly as many probably, because they might say that the Patriots have the most *Superbowl* victories of any franchise, or the Bears have the most all-time *wins* of any franchise (a record that the Packers will hopefully eclipse this coming season). In any case, as much as we might think the Packers are the greatest football team ever, as long as there are other teams who measure their greatness by a different standard, we can't ever really say that claim is undisputed.

Now of course, disputes are by no means limited to the sports world, because whether it's about records or money or property or credit card charges or whatever else it is, there's an awful lot of things all around us every day that can hardly be considered undisputed. But this – what we're talking about in our Gospel lesson for today – this can, and that's because we're not talking about the actions of someone who can get dragged down into the disputes of this sinful world. We're talking about the true Son of God and our Savior, the one who reigns over this world eternally, the one whose love for us and whose victory over everything that opposes us is and always will be undisputed, and our story for today shows us why.

So just like in our Gospel reading from a couple weeks ago, Jesus tells a parable here about a man who owns a vineyard. He planted it, took care of it, did everything he possibly could for it to make it fruitful. When he planted this vineyard, he set it up for total success and then found some farmers who would take care of it for him while he went away on a long journey and who would be ready to present a portion of the fruit harvest when he returned. It seemed like this was the kind of setup that any sharecropper would have loved to have.

Well this time, the picture is just a little different than what we had last time. The owner is still God the Father, and the vineyard still stands for the people of Israel. But this time there's an extra player – the farmers, the tenants are the Jewish religious leaders who were responsible for the spiritual care of God's people. It was a tremendous trust and privilege that the Lord had given to them, and one that it makes all the sense in the world they would show their appreciation for by faithfully caring for God's children, his vineyard.

But the story says that actually the exact opposite happened. “*At harvest time he sent a servant to the tenants so they would give him some of the fruit of the vineyard. But the tenants beat him and sent him away empty-handed. He sent another servant, but that one also they beat and treated shamefully and sent away empty-handed. He sent still a third, and they wounded him and threw him out.*” The owner was good to these tenants. He entrusted his prize possession to them and gave them plenty of time and opportunity to do their work – but when the time came to harvest, the tenants wanted nothing to do with the owner or his servants. They beat them, literally tore up their skin, and sent them away with cuts and bruises rather than grapes and figs.

But that was only the beginning – the beginning of the abuse, and the beginning of the grace. What is that owner to do, Jesus asked. You might expect him to come marching in there with an army of men to take what rightly belongs to him, and to do to those tenants what they did first to his servants. But no, as the cruelty increases, grace intervenes and the owner makes his last and most gracious offer: “*I will send my son, whom I love; perhaps they will respect him.*”

There's almost something pitiful about how much the owner wanted those tenants to change, how far he was willing to go to get them to respect him and make good on their end of the deal. But that just makes it all the more disgraceful to see the tenants' reaction to the owner's son: “*When the tenants saw him, they talked the matter over. ‘This is the heir,’ they said. ‘Let's kill him, and the inheritance will be ours.’ So they threw him out of the vineyard and killed him.*”

What a foolish and nonsensical thing this was. It says they talked the matter over first before they did anything – we call that premeditated murder nowadays, murder in the first degree. They thought that if they got rid of the son the land would be theirs, as if there would be no consequences, everyone would just look the other way, and they'd get away with this scot-free, totally undisputed.

But there is only one thing that is totally undisputed here in this story, and it's the love and victory of the owner – the love and victory of our Lord for our sake. See, all those messengers that were beaten up and disrespected and sent packing? Those were the prophets, men like Elijah and Isaiah and Jeremiah whose faithfulness to God the Jewish religious leaders just couldn't stomach. And yet, with every prophet that was rejected in Israel, God sent another one to take his place with his message of grace and forgiveness.

What love, what grace, what persistence, what dedication to the ultimate salvation of his people that God would not take no for an answer from sinners like the Jews or like us. No matter how many times we think we know better than he does when it comes to how he

answers our prayers, no matter how many times we turn up our noses at something we hear in his Word, no matter how many times we think we could play God better than him as we see the events of our lives and this world unfold, he keeps reaching out to us and keeps giving us more and more opportunities to change our hearts, repent, and follow him. And if all that weren't enough, he even sent us his Son, his beloved Son – and that makes it just all the more tragic what the Jewish religious leaders were about to do to him just a few days later on Holy Week... and it makes it all the more awe-inspiring that our God sent him for us anyway.

It cannot be disputed here the amazing love that our God has for his people in this world. To choose us as his own precious possession in the first place, to take sinners to himself and make us his children – what kindness. To keep reaching out to us even as we slapped his hand away through sin and unbelief – what grace. To send us his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life – what love for this world! And even after this sinful world rejected him and threw him out of their hearts and lives, he didn't just *keep* the vineyard for himself; he didn't even *lease* it out again to someone better; no, he *gave* the vineyard to others, Jesus said, he shared with us the right to be called children of God and to enjoy all the privileges and pleasures of being heirs of his heavenly Kingdom. That is love, friends, and that's why the love of God our Savior for us his people can be absolutely undisputed.

So if you're feeling hurt and unloved right now, if you're feeling like all you have to show for your faithfulness is cuts and bruises, look to Christ and see that he was willing to be hurt even more so that your hurts can be healed; he was willing to undergo cuts and bruises and even death and hell so that you would never have to; and see that he did all that so nothing could ever separate you from his love. It might be hard to see and understand sometimes, but from what we've seen in our story and from the beginning of time, it is undisputed that Jesus is there for you with his arms around you and he is preparing a place for you to be with him in the perfection of Paradise for all eternity.

But I suppose it's easier to see the love than it is to see the victory in the way Jesus described the end of that story about the owner's son going to the vineyard and getting thrown out and killed. And yet that's exactly what we see with our eyes of faith – that's exactly what had to happen in order for Jesus to win the only victory that really mattered, and that was over sin and death for us.

And that was Jesus' point in quoting from Psalm 118: "*Then what is the meaning of that which is written: 'The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone? Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces, but he on whom it falls will be crushed.'*" No, maybe Jesus wasn't the stone that the Jews were looking for, he didn't fit into their grand

design, but that's because they had a tendency to want to build a monument only in honor of themselves. The problem wasn't with Jesus; the problem was with their attitude and the structure of what they were trying to accomplish, because anytime we sinful human beings want to make our lives all about us, it's bound to come crashing down.

But when Jesus was rejected and killed by the Jews, tossed aside and thrown away like a worthless stone plowed up in a farm field, God raised him up three days later and placed him as the *cornerstone* of the Holy Christian Church, the most important stone in the whole structure of a building. See, the cornerstone was the first stone that was laid in a new building, and all the other stones and walls were lined up according to it. If the cornerstone was faulty, the whole building would be that way; but if it was sound, the structure would be, too. Very simply, the cornerstone is what determined how solid the building would be and how strong it would stay under pressure.

Well when Jesus died and rose again for you, he set a sure foundation for your faith that nothing could move and nothing could compromise. By his death and resurrection, he brought us forgiveness and life – forgiveness and life that the devil and this world can never take away from us. By his death and resurrection, he crushed the devil's head and threw him out of our lives and down into hell for all eternity. And by his death and resurrection, he made sure that anyone that attacks him and his people will certainly fail. Whether it's now or on the Day he returns, Jesus will bring justice to this world for every time you've been wronged, for every time you've gotten a raw deal, for every time your faithfulness to him has been met with abuse or ridicule or being stabbed in the back. He will bring justice when he crushes everything and everyone that opposes his purposes and his people, he will deliver us from every evil attack, and he will finally bring us the greatest victory when he takes us home to his heavenly kingdom, to the city with the foundation that will never be shaken because he himself is its cornerstone, both now and forever.

So yes, looking around at this uncertain, sinful world, we can see all kinds of disputes, and none more so than the devil trying to dispute God's power and love in our lives, just like he's been doing from the very beginning. But we know the facts, we've seen the evidence, and God-willing, we'll be blessed to see it again here in the next two weeks. The fact is, no matter what the devil or this world says, Jesus proved to us that his power, his love, his victory is undisputed by his cross and empty tomb – no one can ever take away what he did for us there – and he'll prove it to the whole world as well when he comes back on the Last Day. So let's keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, because he is the foundation of our lives, the cornerstone of our faith, the capstone of our eternities – and for us, that is and always will be undisputed. Amen.