There is plenty of harsh language in this week’s readings: Jesus says, “43 Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom. 44 The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls.” Isaiah says, “ And now I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard. I will remove its hedge, and it shall be devoured; I will break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down. I will make it a waste; it shall not be pruned or hoed, and it shall be overgrown with briers and thorns; I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it.” and the psalmist asks, “Why then have you broken down its walls, so that all who pass along the way pluck its fruit? The boar from the forest ravages it, and all that move in the field feed on it.”

On the other hand, there is tender language as well: “ You brought a vine out of Egypt; you drove out the nations and planted it. You cleared the ground for it; it took deep root and filled the land. The mountains were covered with its shade, the mighty cedars with its branches; it sent out its branches to the sea, and its shoots to the River.” and especially, “ Let me sing for my beloved my love-song concerning his vineyard: My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. He dug it and cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines; he built a watchtower in the midst of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it.”

In Isaiah, the problem is that the vines do not produce good fruit. The solution is to destroy and abandon the vineyard. Although Jesus hearkens back to Isaiah’s vineyard, the problem is not the vines, but the tenants. Jesus also brings in the image of the rejected stone as the cornerstone. As always, we understand stories by finding ourselves within them with the cautionary note that oversimplification can cause misunderstanding. It is clear that Jesus is directing this parable to the church leaders. What does it say to us today?

One thing that we know for sure is that the vineyard is the work of God. God prepares the land, God plants the vines, and God provides the hedges, winepress, and watchtower. This part might be a bit tricky, but it seems that God expects something in return. In the parable, we don’t know if the landowner is reasonable or greedy in his expectations. We only know that the tenants are willing to do anything to keep the produce of the land. Viewed from this angle, this parable shows us hoarding God’s gifts instead of giving glory to God or doing God’s work. It is easy for us to dismiss the killing of Jesus as a historical fact in which we had no part, but the parable leads us to an examination of our responsibility. Is it possible that our action or inaction has consequences? To make this point, we would need to move beyond the actual, physical taking of Jesus’ life to our complicity in the need for Jesus to die. It would be a relief to see ourselves as the people to whom the vineyard is given after the initial tenants are found unworthy, but that doesn’t seem like a logical interpretation. Another false understanding would be that the Pharisees and church leaders understand this parable completely. They have not accepted Jesus as the Son of God; they have only understood that he is going to stubbornly insist that he is the Son of God. They have not decided that they should leave him alone, they have only decided that popular opinion is against them at this time. Jesus knows how this story will play out as well as we do.

If the parable ended with the understanding that it was directed at the Pharisees, it would be easy to move on, but we are left with the rock that will breaks those who fall on it and crushes those upon whom it falls.This is much less intimidating if we look back at the beginning of the parable. God has done everything necessary to provide an abundant harvest. The problem is not based on the production of fruit. We will not be judged by how much fruit we produce, but the fruit of the Spirit that lives in us. God has planted himself deep within us in the Holy Spirit. No lack of success in work, no lack of work itself, can keep us from responding to him with love and joy and the rest. And these are what make us fruitful for the Lord. AMEN