

Epworth Chapel on the Green
March 17, 2013
Fifth Sunday in Lent
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Isaiah 43:16-21
Psalm 126
Philippians 3:8-14
Luke 20:9-19

Our Gospel lesson from Luke this morning presents us another of Jesus' parables, this one commonly known as the parable of the Tenant Farmers. Just prior to the parable, Luke tells us that there are two different audiences who hear the story. Jesus is addressing "the people," or the crowd, and he is also addressing the religious leaders, particularly the chief priests (cf. 19:47-48).

The chief priests, you may recall, were descendents of the tribe of Levi. From Old Testament times, these men had been genealogically established and assigned the task of ministering at the altar in the temple.

The temple, therefore, is the special "turf" of the chief priests. Unlike the synagogue, where laypersons could more freely speak and participate, the temple was controlled exclusively by the clergy. It was their turf, their domain, their sphere of influence and control.

Just prior to our story here in chapter 20, Jesus enters the temple precincts and discovers the moneychangers and others engaging in commerce (exploitation!) as people came to worship and to offer sacrifices. Jesus is infuriated at what he sees, and he drives them all out of the temple.

The chief priests will not stand idly by and remain silent after Jesus' angry demonstration, so they come to him and demand of him: "By what right or authority did you just do what you did? How dare you come onto our "turf" and act like you are the boss?"

As a partial way to answer their question, Jesus tells this parable.

It's a challenging situation for Jesus, because it's obvious that the chief priests are not open to what he is saying and teaching and doing. So Jesus adopts a nuanced strategy. He tells this story, Luke says, "to the crowd," so that the chief priests can listen in and *overhear* it. They listen as Jesus tells the story to the people, thinking that they are not involved. They soon discover, however, that although the story is not told directly *to* them, it is indeed *about* them.

It is very plausible to read this parable *allegorically*, that is, to see each character or detail in the story as representing someone or something else.

The vineyard, for example, was a familiar image for God's people in the Old Testament. Both Isaiah and Ezekiel speak prominently of Israel as God's vineyard (cf. Isaiah 5:1-5; Ez. 15:1-6; 19:10-14). In those Old Testament images, God invested heavily in the vineyard, pouring His time, energy, care, patience and work into it, and God expected a fruitful return from His investment.

In the parable as Jesus tells it here, it would be easy to conclude that the vineyard was in the hands of tenants for a long time. The servants who come

demanding a return on God's investment are *the prophets*, including John the Baptist. And the beloved son who follows the prophets is, of course, Jesus.

The tenants in the story are the religious leaders, especially the chief priests, who not only forget that they are God's tenants, but who actually delude themselves into the notion that they can "take over" the enterprise. This comes to a head when they actually take the son outside and kill him.

The word of final punishment on the tenants (religious leaders) shocks the people listening to Jesus (v. 16), for they sense that they will also fall with the nation as God gives it over to others.

Events that happened subsequent to Jesus telling this story could also be seen through the lenses of this story. In A.D. 70 the Romans swept in and destroyed Jerusalem and began their occupation. Many Christians (then and now) saw the destruction of Jerusalem as God's punishment for the rejection of the prophets by the religious establishment. Further, Christians both then and now saw the giving over of God's vineyard to others as representing the expansion of the Gospel out to Gentiles.

I know that last week I said that Jesus' parables are not like Aesop's fables, where they make a moralistic "point." But it's hard not to travel in that direction in this case. And *if* Jesus is trying to make a singular point with this story, it would seem to be this: *If the tenants of God's vineyard deceive themselves with grand*

thoughts of place and power and pride, there are always others to whom God can give over the trust of the vineyard.

Or, to put it another way: *Whether it is pastors, congregations, or Parachurch organizations, if we cease to remain humble about our charge to serve God's people and the world, the ministry we've been given can be taken from us and given to others.*

What might the implications of this be for us here at Epworth?

I'm not entirely sure.

I watched with interest this week (as most of you probably did) at the gathering of the cardinals in Rome to elect the new Pope. Subsequent to the election of Pope Francis, I saw some things that were noteworthy to me, especially as this Gospel text was rolling through my head.

I observed that when it was time for Pope Francis to greet the Cardinals for the first time, he chose to stand at ground level and greet the Cardinals as brothers and as fellow servants, rather than taking the customary place in the chair of Peter on an elevated throne above them.

I noticed that when it was time to return to the hotel, the Pope refused the Papal limousine and instead rode the bus with the Cardinals.

I understand that for safety and security reasons he may not be able to do this consistently as the new Pope. But some of these early gestures signaled to me

that this man has heard and internalized Jesus' words when he said: "the greatest among you must be your servant; for even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve."

We live in a society where pride, posturing, and a burning desire to get to the top plagues the clergy like a cancer. There are often cases where sins of the flesh are loudly denounced, but sins of the spirit like pride and selfish ambition are not only not denounced, they are applauded and rewarded. The paradigm of "upward mobility" is embraced as the accepted norm. Ministerial status is often equated with the size of the minister's church.

This cancer eats away at every part of the church, through every tradition and denomination. How refreshing, then, to see the newly elected leader of 1.2 billion people leading like a *servant*.

For indeed, that's what he is. And such are we. We are servants; caretakers; stewards. And if we cease to see that, and who we are and what we do becomes more about us than Jesus, God can raise someone else up to do the work.

As we come to the table this morning, let us come with faith, and with humility. May God grant us grace always to see Jesus present to us in the lives of those around us. And may the grace we receive here this morning empower us to serve them in Jesus' Name.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

