

September 21, 2008
The Federated Church of Hyannis
The Reverend Dr. John A. Terry, Pastor

EVICTED FROM THE VINEYARD

Isaiah 5:1-7
Matthew 21:33-46

Mighty and merciful God, we give you thanks for the dawn of a new day. As morning light fills the sky, we rejoice anew in the wonder of your creation. We gather to worship you this morning with praise and thanksgiving. Amen.

Bertrand Russell, the British philosopher once said, “It is preoccupation with possession, more than anything else, that prevents men [sic] from living freely and nobly.” It is like the story of the farmer who was having trouble with a coyote breaking into his chicken coop and stealing his chickens. He rigged up a cage to catch the animal, after which he planned to shoot it. Sure enough, that night the coyote again sneaked into the chicken coop, and was caught in the trap.

That morning when the farmer saw the coyote his anger got the best of him. While the coyote was just doing what was natural for him, the farmer was so outraged that the coyote was stealing his possessions, he vowed to get vengeance. Instead of shooting it, he decided to tie a stick of dynamite to the coyote so he could blow it to pieces. He tied the dynamite to the coyote’s tail, lit the fuse, let the coyote go, and watched it run right back into the chicken coop. And so this parable is a lesson about the danger of our anger in trying to defend what we think is ours.

Jesus used the parable of the vineyard to make his point. It was a common arrangement that the land would be leased and the tenants could keep a certain percentage of the produce. The landowner leased the vineyard to some tenant farmers and left for another country. The tenants worked hard for many years to develop fine grapes for vintage wines. They battled with enemies, bad weather, insects, and disease. But they succeeded. After planting and tending the garden, the vintage season would have been the fifth year.

When the grapes had matured enough to harvest, the absentee owner sent one of his servants to collect the rent. We might understand something of

the resentment toward the absentee owner. All these years it seemed they did everything and he did nothing. In the same way, God gives the gift of time for us to bear the fruits of the spirit and leave us alone. Those who are taught the ways and teachings of Christ are granted the gift of time to let the Spirit grow. For all of us there comes a season when God expects us to bear the fruits worthy of the calling to which we have each been called.

Yet some wish to keep the things of God for themselves and get angry when asked to return a portion of their time and treasure to God. It is like the old joke about the minister, the priest, and the rabbi. They were all discussing what they did with the offering. The priest said that after the service he took the offering from the communion table and threw it in the air. What landed on the table was God's, what landed on the floor was his.

The rabbi said that he did something similar. He placed his robe on the floor, stood in the middle, threw the offering in the air and what landed on his robe was his. What landed outside his robe was God's. The minister said he too, did something similar. He took the offering into his office, threw it into the air. What God took was God's. What landed on the ground was his.

The fruit of the vineyard was borne both for the benefit of those who tended it and for the benefit of the one who owned it. St. Paul talked of Christians bearing the fruits of the Spirit: love, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, and self-control. In a world such as ours where self-actualization, self-fulfillment, and self-interest are cultural values, the notion of our life existing to bear fruit for someone else can be a difficult concept.

In popular religious culture there is a lot more talk about being blessed than about being a blessing to others, a lot more talk about thanking God for what we have been given than being thankful that we can give to others. We are concerned about our relationship with God and our prayer life, as well we should be. But what of the spiritual fruits we bear that benefit others? We may be standing in the need of prayer, but what about leading others into prayer? We may want a closer relationship with God, but what of inviting another into a fellowship of faith? When we only receive blessings and bounty without freely sharing we become like those in the parable.

Being driven by the desire to keep for themselves, and rejecting the notion that they should give back to the owner is what led the tenants to violence. Even when the owner's son came, they were violent to him. Killing the son

had legal implications for the ownership of the property. If there was no son to inherit the land, it might be seized by a tenant farmer.

The response of the landowner to the tenants, their greed and violence, seems either absurdly tolerant or completely stupid. If you owned an apartment building and the superintendent, going to collect rent, was beaten and killed by tenants, would you simply hire another building superintendent to see if the tenants would give him the money? If they killed him as well, would you send your own flesh and blood to collect the rent? No. You would send the police, or you would send Mr. Smith and Mr. Weston. What manner of owner would have such patience?

It is an owner who is patient beyond measure, forgiving and hopeful that the tenants can and will change their ways. This is a parable of judgment. It is also a parable of hope. When the tenants shamefully treated the servants who had come to collect what was rightfully the owner's, the tenants of the vineyard got another chance. When they behaved with the same selfishness and anger, the owner thought he should give them one last chance, this time sending his son.

But there is an end to the chances. God gives us a chance and another chance and yet another chance. But there is a limit to God's patience. There is a time of accountability. There is a time of judgment. Notice that Jesus did not end the parable himself. It is an open ended parable. How would you finish the story? What would you do? The penalty of death is the conclusion of the listeners. That is not the conclusion of God. God did not send armies to kill the unfaithful and rebellious. God sent the only begotten son to suffer and die for the sake of sinners, and to let sinners create their own consequences.

Jesus followed the parable by quoting Psalm 118:22-23 which speaks of the Messiah as the rejected stone which becomes the corner stone of God's new building. Those who would throw away the stone on which the building rests would be foolish indeed. But that is what happened. God sent the only begotten son, and he was rejected and beaten and killed. Jesus told these people exactly what they were about to do to him. Jesus told this parable on Tuesday of Holy Week, and within hours plots were hatched, bribes were made, and the son of God went to his death as it was foretold.

The passage ends with anger at Jesus and a plot to do him in. It is no wonder. Who likes to be told that their behavior is not acceptable and their

home grown faith is rejected by God? Paul wrote in Ephesians 2:19-20, that the church is “built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone.” This cornerstone becomes a stumbling block for the unfaithful. Many claim a kind of generic faith and system of beliefs and say things like, “I am a very spiritual person – in my own way.”

For Christians there is the particularity of Jesus, which is a way of saying that he is the particular person whom we say is savior. The way of salvation is not through being nice or following certain rules or in some vague sense being “religious.” Jesus said he is the way, the truth, and the life. Those who find Jesus and his gospel message a possible way, some of the truth, one option in life that is a stumbling block.

Jesus is the corner stone on which the church is built, yet his ways are a stumbling block for many. The very one that is rejected is the savior. It is like a story from India about a mongoose. An Indian family had a pet mongoose who shared their humble hut. It was beloved by the children, sharing their meals and sleeping on their mats at night.

One day in the cruel heat of midsummer, the mother placed her baby outdoors under a tree while she labored inside in the heat of the home. Suddenly she noticed the mongoose creeping into the hut toward its accustomed bowl of water.

The sleek rodent was covered with dust, and the mother was shocked to see its jaws stained with blood. In a flash, she guessed that the animal had attacked the sleeping baby. In her horror, she snatched a heavy rice bowl, and smashed the head of the mongoose. Rushing outdoors to care for the child, she found the baby sleeping peaceably, and beside the child the body of a cobra which the mongoose had fought and killed. She had killed the savior, not the destroyer, of the child.

So we are free to act as disciples or detractors of Christ. In the parable the absence of the landowner made it possible for the tenants to act as though the owner of the vineyard did not exist. Even though there is evidence that the landowner once created the vineyard, planted and hedged it in, improved it in every way, he is nowhere to be seen. Even when the tenants were violent toward his servants, there was no evidence that the owner would do anything other than send more servants for them to abuse.

Something happened to them in the owner's absence. They stopped thinking of the place as his and only thought of it as theirs. In the absence of the owner any fear they had was gone, any feeling that they needed to respect him was absent. Something happened to them that their lives were driven by the desire of keeping it all for themselves. They no longer made decisions based on right and wrong, on what was lawful and proper. It was all about keeping what they wanted and thought they should have.

A great deal of religious rhetoric has to do with the presence of God, but a central experience we all have is of the absence of God, particularly in the presence of all of the sin and evil of the world. In this parable Jesus said that the evil is not a judgment against the absentee householder. It is a judgment against those who sin, because to them will come the greater and the inevitable loss.

This was originally told as a parable about the faithfulness of the Jews. But now it is a parable about us. We have been given this church and how have we done? This is not our congregation. This is God's congregation. It is a rich heritage we have received. Have we carefully and lovingly worked to increase its yield? Or have we let the fruit of past labors decline? Have we recognized and celebrated those who have been sent to us? And, most importantly, have we welcomed his Son and given him the fruitful lives he seeks? Has he been a stumbling block or the cornerstone?

Today we begin a season of stewardship in this church. We are reminded that we are stewards and not owners. We may live in an ownership society, but Jesus reminds us that it all belongs to God. It is for us to be fruitful and multiply, to increase the fruits of God's spirit. Christ comes to ask us to pay the rent. Some respond with glad and generous hearts. Some pretend they don't hear. Some get angry at even being asked.

The absentee owner will eventually arrive and hold the tenants accountable for their actions. We find ourselves the tenants in God's vineyard, tilling the soil of life, called to bear the fruits of the spirit, of love, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness and self-control. When the time comes when we are asked to return to God a portion of the fruits of God's vineyard, God's portion of the blessings with which we are blessed, how will we respond?