

St. Mark's Episcopal Church
Albuquerque, New Mexico
Sunday October 8 Proper 22A
Text: Matthew 21:33-46
Preacher Christopher McLaren
Topic: The Way of Dispossession: On Not Wanting it All

A friend of mine once told me about a comment he made in the presence of his mother, that "the most useful skill he possessed was the ability to type. It was the one skill he had acquired that he utilized every day."

To his rather self-congratulatory comments about the virtue of his typing, his mother replied, "Well, aren't you grateful that I forced you to stay in that high school typing class that summer?"

"What," he said

"You didn't like the class, you wanted to quit after the first day. But I said that we had already paid the \$25 for the course and you were going to have to stay in the course, like it or not."

He had completely forgotten that typing was a skill he had acquired through the gifts of others and through the tough insistence of his mother. Somehow, he had forgotten that what he regarded as his own acquisition, his possession, his talent, was also a gift from his mother's tough love.

Today's parable should probably be a standard text for all real estate agents in training. Any real estate agent or property manager with experience can explain this parable in no time at all. It's a problem of tenant selection and there is whole body of business law dedicated to dealing with these kinds of disputes.

Jesus tells this parable of the Kingdom to a difficult audience of antagonistic religious leaders as the controversy surrounding him swirls in Jerusalem. Jesus has been "causing trouble," something he's rather good at and in this parable only serves to stoke the fire.

It is often called the Parable of the Wicked Tenants but a later verse makes it clear that the parable is actually about the Kingdom of God. The landowner purchases land, plants a lush vineyard, makes some impressive improvements to the property and then contracts with some tenants while he moves to a distant country. There is a kind of patient absurdity to the story as the owner tries over and over again to collect his share of revenue from the vineyard.

As the story goes, at harvest time, the landowner sends his servants or agents to the vineyard to collect his share of the produce or profits. But in a bizarre move the

tenants decide to abuse the landowner's servants, beating them up and killing one of them thinking that somehow this will allow them to gain possession of the vineyard. The phrase "thinking error" comes to mind. Again, the landowner sends more servants thinking that a show of force might change their mind but they too are treated the same way. And finally, the landowner sends his own beloved Son reasoning that his authority and status will change the hearts and minds of the tenants. It is an awful story as the tenants decide to kill the son as well, because in their twisted logic this might mean that they can inherit the vineyard for themselves.

I have to confess that I've never really understood the incoherent logic of the tenants. How did they think they would inherit something without a relationship to the landowner? What were they thinking? Did they really think that they could get away with it, get away with murder and the theft of a vineyard? Evidently their greed got in the way of good sense and reason.

The clear moral of the story is that the landowner needed to do a more thorough background check. Seriously, didn't he ask other people about these tenants, didn't their reputation precede them? Weren't their ways of checking up on these tenants even before the internet and free credit scores?

We know that this parable in Matthew foreshadows the rejection and killing of Jesus in Jerusalem that has been preceded by the killing of the prophets before him. In its original context, Jesus probably told this parable to encourage his band of disciples who were discouraged by the rejection their master suffered at the hands of a few fearful religious leaders. But later Matthew told this parable to explain some of the struggles in the new emerging church -- a movement within Israel -- that had to come to grips with the rejection of the church by fellow Jews.

A note of caution, it is important that we not take this parable out of context by trying to apply it to the contemporary situation of Christians and Jews today. Within this parable there is plenty of fodder for anti-Semitism of the worst sort, especially when it is paired with a reading from Isaiah: "For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel."

However, that kind of simplistic and dangerous interpretation must be rejected. This is not a parable about God taking the Kingdom of God away from Israel and giving it to the Gentiles. The Kingdom of God is wider than we can ever hope or imagine. We do not want to get caught up in this kind of interpretive move that has been the cause of far too much bloodshed and religious oppression in the church's dark past.

So, what are we to make of this parable?

Excluding people is a well-documented human habit. Each of us know exactly what I'm talking about. If we have thoughts that disturb us, we try to push them out. If

there are people who are undesirable, we want to make sure that they are not welcomed into our homes, school, clubs, churches. We try to clear space where we think that we can breathe pure air. We have our reasons of course and they are shared by our friends. Many of our reasons are impeccable and accepted by others because they simply “reflect the way the world is.”

Exclusion is a part of our lives, sometimes it makes us feel safer, saner, more in charge and more ourselves. It is at times part of our well-defined identity even. We know who we are because of who we exclude, who we guard against, of how we keep our boundaries. Our exclusions can make us believe that we are part of the chosen, the elite the special the privileged. We know who we are because we know who we are not.

But what if our exclusions get out of hand? Exclusions by nature narrow life down, narrow us down. What if our circle is too tight? What if we’ve circled the wagons too much? Is it possible that we are pushing away the very situations, the very people we need? What if a friend of mine is correct, “That we tend to avoid with passion the very thing that will save us.”

The name Jesus means, “he will save them from their sins (Matt. 1:21).” In classic theological thinking sin is considered as separation. Separation from God, one another even from ourselves. We are lost because we have become separated, lost our connections, become alienated. If you read someone like Augustine, he says that people are sinful because they are wrapped up in themselves, they’ve forgotten that they are part of something larger.

Jesus is constantly trying to call people out of their separation and back into communion, to connect with God and with their neighbor. We don’t call the Holy Eucharist, communion for no reason. We are here to try to overcome our constant tendency to exclude and separate. Jesus invites us into a liberating way of including others and thinking about the world in a different way, called the Kingdom of God. It’s a new way of being, a new consciousness and it’s both attractive and offensive. We are just better at dividing, at shunning than welcoming and including.

Consider the parable, Jesus tells about the vineyard and its murderous tenants. They seem to have just one real reason for doing what they are doing. One rational explanation, that they whisper to themselves, “come, let us kill him and get his inheritance.”

To put it simply, they want it all. They want it all for themselves. They do not want to be accountable to God or to anyone else for that matter. Their way of greed is the way to isolation and violence. They do not want to include others lest there not be enough for them. If they share or include there will not be enough to go around: enough money, enough land, enough love, enough importance, enough everything. They live in a world of scarcity. If you have some of it, then there is less for me. They want to make sure that they get theirs. They exclude because they want it all.

We all know this way of thinking. We all know this way of being. We all are susceptible to it. It is a desire born of isolation and fear. It's a psychology of lacking and defensiveness. It's a theology of a God that we control rather than a God who desires to be in relationship with us.

However, we do not own the vineyard: we work in it. When we want it all, we inherit nothing.

The truth is that no matter where we live or what we have, we are all no more than tenants in God's Kingdom. Nothing ever truly belongs to us. In the final analysis, everything we have has been lent to us by a gracious God. Everything is borrowed for a time. Everything we have is to be offered in service to the kingdom of God. Like the priests and Pharisees of this narrative, we too might wish the world were different, that tenants were owners and servants, masters. But it is not so.

In the end the economy of the landowner is not what we expected. It is not of this world. The point of the story is not about land or possessions or ownership or productivity or negotiation skills. The point of the story is about the Kingdom of God and how we find ourselves related to this deep mystery. For the follower of Jesus, the kingdom of God becomes a kind of numinous destination toward which all of life is bent. What does it mean to be part of this kingdom? What kind of fruit do we produce as participants in this kingdom?

In the parable, the tenants begrudge the landowner the share of the produce that belongs to him. They are only tenants, stewards of the vineyard but they act as if it all belongs to them, as if they have earned it as a possession. But in fact, it is not their possession, it has been lent out to them. This is the truth for us as well, if we can find our way into this parable. Everything we have is a gift from God. Everything we think that we possess is in fact not our possession but something lent out to us to be used in the service of the kingdom of God.

The parable is a parable about dispossession. Sometimes we think that life is our own possession, that we have come by it of our own efforts but we do not realize that all that we have is a radical gift from the loving hand of God. That we did not arrive where we are without other gifts, without help, without grace at work on our lives, without our mother making us take typing class one summer.

The spiritual path at work in this parable reminds me of the poetry of T.S. Eliot in the Four Quartets:

“To arrive where you are,
to get from where you are not,
You must go by a way wherein there is no ecstasy.
In order to arrive at what you do not know
You must go by a way which is the way of ignorance.

In order to possess what you do not possess
You must go by the way of dispossession.

If we want to live in the economy of the kingdom, it requires that we be willing to give what we have away, that we become alive to the possibility of spending our lives to save them, of losing what we have to gain the kingdom of God instead of trying to hold on to our produce, or killing the servants of God who come looking for our generous portion. The economy of the kingdom is one that shifts our focus away from acquisition and greed toward the building up of the kingdom of heaven to the Glory of God.

If we can imagine a different response in the parable, perhaps we can begin to think our way into enacting the kingdom of God here and now. What if when the master's servants came to collect the produce, the tenants gladly gave what was offered and more. What if they said, "Oh, yes we have your produce and also these other crops that we planted that you didn't know about and also this extra income we've made by using your land this way. We are so grateful for this property and vineyard and work, that we want to share something of everything with you." What if instead of refusing to share the produce they had celebrated the fact that they had a harvest to share and that they were in fact able to harvest and able to live in a productive and fruitful way. What the owner of the vineyard desires is to be in relationship, to work together to produce a harvest and to give life to all involved. The kingdom of God emerges in our life when we come to that stunning realization that all that we have belongs to God and that God is the giver of all good gifts. The kingdom becomes ours by way of dispossession. When we give away what we have received as gift from God's gracious hand, it is then that we discover what we did not grasp returning to us in even greater measure, pressed down shaken together and running over.

In the self-giving love of Jesus, we have received the way of dispossession, the foundation of what it means to participate in the kingdom of God. It is in embracing Christ's self-giving love, of giving what we have away, that we begin to discover the depth of a spiritual life that is worth living, no because it is the easy way but rather because it is the way that leads to life abundant.

They are not foolish, who give what they cannot keep to gain what they cannot lose.