

MEDITATION
Matthew 21:33-43
Preached by Dr. Cahill
Babcock Presbyterian Church
Sunday, October 5, 2014

The Parable of the Wicked Tenants comes on the heels of Jesus' Parable of the Two Sons which, if you recall, was the text for last week's sermon. The first parable told the story about the two sons being asked to go out and work their father's vineyard. The first son refused but thought better of it and went out anyway. The second son promised he would go but he didn't. So this is a parable about someone who disappoints you while today's parable is about someone betraying you. It's one thing to disappoint someone who's really depending on you but it's quite another thing to betray someone. Peter disappointed Jesus when he denied knowing Jesus three times. Judas betrayed Jesus when he handed him over to his enemies. Letting a friend down is bad enough but betrayal is the worst.

Keep in mind Jesus taught these two parables back to back the Monday before Good Friday in the temple confines. From the Pharisees' and Sadducees' perspective it was bad enough hearing about Jesus' shenanigans when he was way out in the countryside. Now he crossed over the threshold of their very doorstep and was stirring things up in their own house. It had to be galling for these guardians of the Covenant who labored long and hard in God's vineyard faithfully managing the religious affairs of Israel. Then this Jesus fellow barges in, uninvited, and literally turns everything upside down, disassembling all their carefully crafted beliefs and practices.

Jesus had to know they felt this way but it wasn't his intention to destroy what they built up, but to redeem it. He came to give them a new vision of the Kingdom of God which in these two parables he likened to God's vineyard.

Of course, the religious leaders were intimately familiar with the vineyard metaphor. Centuries earlier the prophet Isaiah coined this phrase in God's love song to the children of Israel.

*Let me sing for my beloved
my love song concerning this
vineyard:
My beloved had a vineyard on a
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...
he expected to yield grapes
but it yielded wild grapes...*

*When I expected it to yield grapes
Why did it yield wild grapes?
(Isaiah 5:1-4)*

According to Isaiah, God chose the site or the actual geographical location for what Moses called the land flowing with milk and honey. He then created a space for his people not just to live but especially to produce a harvest of justice and peace and also become that light to all the nations of the earth. But time after time, even though God's people said they'd go out and labor in the vineyard, like the second son, they disappointed God. That explains why God patiently continued to send prophets or truth tellers to the civil and religious leaders of Jerusalem calling them to repent and stop disappointing God with their disobedience.

But they never listened. Time and again they rejected God's messengers and refused to submit to God's pleas. Instead they kept on producing wild (or sour) grapes.

*"...he (God) expected justice
but he saw bloodshed;
righteousness
but heard a cry." (Isaiah 5:7)*

You can be sure the ruling classes in Jerusalem hated it whenever these prophets popped up out of nowhere telling them they got it all wrong. On the contrary they thought they were doing quite nicely, especially since there was prosperity in the land, at least there was prosperity for themselves and their friends.

So rejecting the prophets they returned to their fine houses, feasted at their banquet tables and sang their hymns of victory after offering up their sacrifices in the temple. How could God be that disappointed when everything was going so well?

But it couldn't last. Prosperity and self-complacency is a fatal mix and soon the little world they created came crashing down on their heads because they became so self-confident and myopic they couldn't see why God planted the vineyard and gave over to their keeping in the first place.

This was the warning bundled up in the Parable of the Wicked Tenants. The betrayal of the covenant the religious leaders convinced themselves they were keeping would lead to their destruction.

But this warning isn't frozen in time, that is, we shouldn't feel too complacent thinking only the Pharisees and Sadducees were guilty of this betrayal. Jesus' parables are timeless, the message given then is as relevant today as it was two thousand years ago because despite our best intentions we don't get it right either.

Here's what I mean. Today we are the guardians of the Lord's Vineyard but like the Jewish religious leaders back then we confuse the Vineyard, or the Kingdom of God with the

institution we call the church. You see the two are not one in the same. The Kingdom of God is the way things should be that is God's will is always done here on earth as it is in heaven. The Kingdom of God is harmony and peace in accordance to God's justice the way it will be when Christ returns riding on the clouds after the last trumpet sounds.

The Church on the other hand, is not an end in itself but the means to the greater end that end being to hold the fort until God's Kingdom comes in all its glory and power. For this to happen we must remember the Church we are the Body of Christ, God's instrument of reconciliation in the world. And as the Body of Christ, following Christ's example we are charged with the responsibility of sacrificing the Church, just as Christ sacrificed himself.

But we don't want to hear that do we? Look at the history of the Church these past two thousand years. Hasn't there been too much time and energy put into preserving the institution, protecting its position and wealth instead of giving it away? This was certainly true in the late Medieval Church just prior to the Great Reformation five hundred years ago. The Popes ruled like kings using their power to consolidate even more power. That's why leaders like Martin Luther and later John Calvin fought to reform the Church, to bring the Church back to its original moorings. But despite their monumental efforts we still didn't get it right. How can I say that? Because we're still about the business of managing the Church to keep the institution alive and kicking instead of allowing ourselves to be led and empowered by the Holy Spirit to offer up ourselves as a living sacrifice which is our spiritual worship.

Our denomination, The Presbyterian Church in the US, and our congregation, Babcock Presbyterian Church, can't be seen as an institution to be managed but as a living organism laboring in God's Vineyard. We've been summoned to produce a harvest to feed a hungry world. Just as Jesus tried to energize the religious leaders of his day to recapture God's vision, to be a light to all the peoples of the earth, the same urgent warning is being sent to us today. Repent, be healed, and then go labor in the vineyard, become one of the few who not only say yes but also do something about it. Otherwise, God will have to lease his vineyard to others who will give back to God the produce at harvest time.

Every day somewhere in the United States a church is being closed down and sold off, hopefully to a new faith community being given the chance to bring in the harvest. At the same time there are other churches reversing the trend to decline, not simply to preserve the institution they love, but to produce a new harvest to feed their neighborhoods. They've come to realize it isn't just what happens in their buildings, it's really what happens when they leave. Certainly both are necessary but like love and marriage you can't have one without the other.

Over sixty years ago God gave his people in Loch Raven Village a vision, to gather together and become the Body of Christ and people like Bill and Marye Malashuk, Gus and Jo Toole, Bill and Kate Hildebrand, Ed and Bunny Gillis and many other people whose names are a distant memory. They sacrificed their time, talent and treasure if only because they wanted to please God by bringing Christ to their neighborhood.

On the World-Wide Communion Sunday we are joining believers all over the globe to remember Jesus, the rejected head cornerstone who was killed but raised up to forgive us and then call us to be his Church, the Body of Christ. If you quiet yourself and listen closely you'll hear him calling your name, inviting you to do only what you can do to labor in his vineyard to produce a harvest you never imagined possible. Quiet.

Quiet yourself, listen hard and hear the voice of Jesus.