

A Different Perspective

Today's Gospel reading continues from last week where Jesus had told a parable about two sons who were told by their father to work in the vineyard. In the sermon, we saw that neither of the sons really did the will of the father. We saw that Jesus displayed what it means to do the will of the Father when He continued to obey the Father even when this obedience led to the cross. This week's Gospel text is also located in a vineyard. Instead of the sons and the father being the main characters, the main characters are an absentee landlord and the tenants to whom the landowner rents the land to tend to the vineyard. I would like to review how this parable has typically been understood and mistakenly applied to the world and then offer a possible different perspective on what Jesus is trying to teach us.

Traditionally this parable of the wicked tenants has been interpreted as an allegory. That is the characters and places in the story represent people and places in real life. Traditionally, this parable is interpreted as the landowner is seen to be God, the tenants as the Israelites, the son is Jesus and the vineyard as the Promised Land. The conclusion that is usually made is that since the Israelites did not recognize Jesus as the Messiah and killed Him, the covenant God made with them was taken away and given to the Gentiles. Therefore, we are now the Chosen People. This line of thinking forms the basis of 'replacement theology' where Christians are now the Chosen People and the Jews have lost the promises of the covenant. The use of this parable to support this replacement theology is in error and is not consistent with the rest of the Biblical narrative. Even within the scope of the parable itself this is a wrong conclusion to make. This is evident when the chief priests and elders concluded that Jesus was talking about them as being the wicked tenants and not the Jewish people in general.

If interpreting this parable as an allegory leads us to make wrong conclusions, then we need to ask if this is the right way to understand the parable. In an allegory, things line up exactly, so that it is clear what each character or place represents. But when we do this, we observe a significant difference between the parable and the reality it is supposed to represent. In the parable, the tenants recognized who the son of the landowner was, whereas in real life, the Jewish authorities did not recognize Jesus as the son of God. So, if this significant part of the allegory falls apart, doubt can be cast upon interpreting the parable as a straightforward allegory about Jesus and our inheritance and designation as the new "Chosen People."

The use of allegory in interpreting a parable of Jesus often keeps us from understanding the parable from a different perspective. Considering a different perspective, what if we consider that the landowner does not represent God but instead represents a true absentee landowner, a person? When we consider when Matthew may have penned this account, which is generally accepted to be sometime after the Roman destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D., we could see where the first century Christians might associate the Roman emperor as the absentee landlord. These first Christians would associate the Jewish leaders' answer about what the landowner would do is based to how the Romans reacted to rebellion in specific and to world's system of power in general. A system where power dominates others and that power is used to keep the status quo and acquire more power.

From this perspective, we can hear a different message. Instead of feeling smug that we were made God's Chosen People because the Jewish people broke the covenant and lost the promises of God, the message now is an indictment of the ways we act out of power. These acts include: the domination of one culture by another; one country taking natural resources out of another country and selfishly using and hoarding those resources without fair compensation; genocide and all forms of ethnic cleansing. But as

we open up the possibilities of how power is used, things a little closer to home can come to mind. These uses of power can include acts of domination: physical or mental abuse of another person; not allowing someone the opportunity for an education or a job advancement for any reason other than lack of ability; taking someone's property just because you want it and can take it; and denying others food, clothing and shelter because they don't agree or don't fit in with those who control things. By not limiting our interpreting this parable as an allegory, we can see all those ways in which we can misuse and abuse the power that we have. I like to refer to this paradigm of using power as a game of 'king of the hill' and it is played by whoever has any kind of power and uses that power to keep and even increase their power. It is a game played on the world stage, in states and cities and towns and even in churches and families. It is a game which truly prevents people from being what they were created to be.

Jesus came to establish a new order on earth; a new way of doing things; a new paradigm. Typically, when new leadership takes over an organization; whether the organization is a country, a business or even a church; they talk about changing the way things are done. The new leaders talk about a new order. Unfortunately, in most cases, the new order really is much like the old order. It may be called something else and the jargon and key phrases may change, but basically it operates on the same principle of power and maintaining that power. Jesus, however, came to change the system. This new system is one that is not based on power over others but on power that serves others. It is a "what can I do for you" attitude instead of "what can I get from you." Jesus best demonstrated this by going to the cross and giving His life for us. He did not use the power He had to make people follow His way. Jesus wanted to show that in this new way everybody benefits, not just a select few who benefit in a system based on power. Jesus came to truly change the world, not just replace the leader.

When we truly incorporate Jesus' way, our lives change. We stop playing the "power" game in all aspects of our lives. We stop looking for ways to dominate another person; stop looking to take advantage of others, stop looking at what we can take from others. Rather, we use what power we have to meet the needs of others, so that they can enjoy the blessings that we have been given. It is a lifestyle where the needs of all people, in all places, are met. It is a lifestyle that gives us real hope not only in the afterlife but also hope in the here and now.

This parable also tells us that those who insist on continuing in the old ways of power and domination will not be a part of the new "building" of the Kingdom of God. A Kingdom that is breaking into our world and has Jesus Christ as its cornerstone, its foundation. This cornerstone has started something new in the world. Do we want to be a part of this new Kingdom, or do we wish to cling to the old ways? Making this choice is not the same as voting in an election or deciding where to buy gas and groceries. It is not the same as deciding to be as "green" as you can in your lifestyle. This choice means that we choose a whole new way of doing things, of relating to people. It means sharing the blessings that have been given by God with everyone. It means seeing in everybody a reflection of God rather than differences between people. It means living as if heaven was on earth. Sounds preposterous doesn't it? However, with the help of God it is achievable.

YouTube links:

Gospel and Sermon: <https://youtu.be/qGoSZPA7Je4>

Service: <https://youtu.be/hEDekulQ--g>