

We Don't Own the Vineyard???

My funny cousin Ed was in town last month.

Many of you will remember he's the guy who preached at my ordination and had everyone put their hand on their own heads as a way of saying that the priesthood isn't just here in the pulpit, you are all priests charged with sacred duties by God.

Ed was right about that.

Then you may recall that he started talking about how so many of us lived together in Nanakuli for a time, and how he was the only normal one.....

One of our friends laughed out loud when he said that, but the rest of us knew he just forgot to take his medication that day.

While we were chatting last week, Ed told me about his frustration with the church in Manila.

You see, he's trying to get a house from the diocese so he can open a house of hospitality for folks who need a safe place to stay for awhile.

The church has plenty of places, but they don't want the kind of people such a place will attract, and the powers that be seem to be perfectly content with that decision.

Which makes today's gospel lesson something like a a rainstorm on our collective parade.

Today, Jesus asks the most uncomfortable question he can possibly ask we good Christian souls: "Who owns the vineyard?"

Or, to put it another way: "Who owns the church and its buildings and grounds and its bank accounts?"

"Who owns whatever personal wealth I may have acquired?"

"Who owns this country, this planet?"

"When children show up on our borders, what are we called to do about them?"

I have to say as I read today's gospel lesson over and over, I started to squirm.....

Because the fact is, in my heart of hearts, I firmly believe that I own my wealth, I firmly believe the church can welcome or reject whoever it pleases, and as a citizen of this country, I am convinced that I have rights far superior to non-citizens.....

And yet, as I go back yet again and again to the parable for today, my way of thinking is on a collision course with Jesus' way of thinking; and that's a collision that my best thinking cannot survive.

This morning, Jesus leads people who think just like I do through a story that leads these people, who are just like me, to exclaim:

"He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the harvest time."

I am the wretch.

It is Dorothy Day, the founder of the Catholic Worker movement who inspires my cousin Ed.

It was a Russian author, Fyodor Dostoevsky, who inspired Dorothy Day.

"Dorothy particularly loved a story called "A Lady of Little Faith," in which an elderly priest tries to encourage a wealthy woman to take the risk of "active love" as a remedy for her doubts, for her unbelief.

He says to her: "Strive to love your neighbor actively and [tirelessly]..."

In so far as you advance in love you will grow surer of the reality of God and of the [life that is eternal]."

She isn't hearing him and simply goes on about her daydreams, fantasizing about a life of service to the poor, but these are dreams shot through with her overwhelming fear that her sacrifices will be met with a lack of proper gratitude, with an absence of the thanks she feels she so richly deserves.

Understanding this, the old man—speaking kindly—peers directly into her eyes, and knowing her need to be in control, understanding her desire to be the center of attention, replies:

"I am sorry I can say nothing more consoling to you, for love in action is a harsh and dreadful thing compared with love in dreams." Laurel A. Dykstra, paraphrased.

"Love in action is a harsh and dreadful thing compared to love in dreams."

In my train wreck with Jesus, something harsh and dreadful indeed happens.

My opinions, my wants, my best thinking, are crushed, ground to bits, by the stumbling block, by the cornerstone, that is Jesus, that is the Living God.

This crushing doesn't happen because I smarten up or even because I find some kind of duty to embrace.

The crushing happens when, contrary to what my predecessors were sure would happen, (all that miserable death and rejection stuff) in fact doesn't happen.

What happens is Jesus gives himself over to be killed, and rather than coming back for revenge, comes back with forgiveness, comes back with peace.

And as I stand there face to face with this gracious savior, the tight grip I have on my bags of money, my clutching at my rights, my justifications, my privileges, well, that grip begins to loosen as I stand in shame and gratitude before the true owner of all that I have, before the true owner of all that I am.

If all I have is God's, only on loan to me, then the only thing to do is to open who I am and what I have to anyone and everyone in need.

This is what makes Jesus such a stumbling block, the downpour on my parade, because he takes us out of our naval gazing obsession with self and moves us into relationship with folks who are weird and different and sometimes smelly.

Jesus is inviting everybody to the greatest party ever thrown, the only question is whether we might accept, since it means associating with THOSE people!

Paul gets it, which is why he can say with such utter confidence:

"For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith."

In other words, "Paul trusts that once we have heard that we are loved in such a pure and open and generous way, perhaps we too can welcome others in the same way, not as objects to be exploited but as persons to be treasured, not as opponents competing for scarce resources but brothers and sisters deserving of our unconditional support.

This is the business of the kingdom of God, it is caring for and loving each other-- right now.

Paul is able to see that the cross and resurrection are the pivot point of history, the fulcrum on which God moves the destiny of the whole universe.

Nothing is the same for Paul once he encounters the crucified and risen One, and nothing is the same for us either.

Because we live in the grace of God NOW, this moment IS the hour of our salvation, so let us be glad and rejoice!

And there is one more thing.

We discover that it isn't about us after all.

That, in fact, it never was about us.

Instead, it's all about God, and God's marvelous truth that love is stronger than hate, that life is stronger than death, and that God's future is deeper and more satisfying than either the past we've created or the future we deserve.

Because the gospel is true, we are free to treat others as Christ did," all because the vineyard, this world, our country, my wallet, never belonged to me in the first place. David Lose, paraphrased.

It all belongs to God.

Now go, you priests of God, and do likewise.

+amen

