

Who Owns the Vineyard?

I've been chatting with my funny cousin Ed this past week or so.

Many of you will remember Ed.

He preached at my ordination and had everyone put their hand on their own heads (like this!) as a way of saying that the priesthood isn't just here in the pulpit, that you are all priests charged with sacred duties by God.

Ed was right about that.

What we were chatting about last week was a discussion we here at St. E's are having, about possibly using the rectory as a house of hospitality for those in need; and how we are in conversation with a couple who are members of the Lay order of St Francis of Assisi.

My cousin replied that he is feeling some "holy envy" because he's been trying for years to get the archdiocese in Manila to provide a house for precisely this kind of ministry, all with no success.

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.

Those kinds of seemingly "good business" decisions are exactly in the bullseye Jesus is aiming at today.

Today, Jesus asks the most uncomfortable question he can possibly ask we good Christians:

"Who owns the vineyard?"

Meaning, who owns the church buildings and grounds and its bank accounts?

Who owns whatever personal wealth I may have acquired?

Who owns this country, this planet?

When huge hurricanes that are likely made worse by man made global warming, what is the gospel saying to our collective failure to address this problem?

When children show up on our borders, or when long time undocumented members of our communities face deportation, what are we called to do?

And what of our love affair with guns; whose primary purpose is killing animals and people; so terribly on display this last week in Las Vegas?

I have to say as I read today's gospel lesson, I start to squirm.....

Because my gut says, of course I own my wealth, of course the church can welcome or reject whomever it pleases, of course the second amendment enshrines my right to own as many guns as I want, and as a citizen of this country, my rights are far superior to non-citizens.....

And yet, when I see my way of thinking through the light of this parable, I am on a collision course with Jesus; and that's a collision that my way cannot survive.

This morning, Jesus leads people who think just like I do through a story that leaves them hollering out:

"He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and lease the vineyard to others...!"

Who is the wretch?

I am the wretch.

I am tightly wrapped up in, beholden to, and benefit from, the violence and self-sufficiency and justifications that our way of life promotes.

It's not just me.

Like the tenants in the vineyard, we have come to believe that we are owners, not tenants, and we have watered down the costly love of the gospel into something like a mascot sort of god, one who is cuddly and sweet, who adores us in our comforts.

The God of Jesus is no mascot.

The author Fyodor Dostoevsky shines a light on the God of Jesus in his story called "A Lady of Little Faith."

In it, an elderly priest encourages a wealthy woman to take the risk of "active love" as a remedy for her doubts, her unbelief.

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

In so far as you advance in love you'll 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 serving the poor, but these dreams are shot through with the overwhelming fear that her sacrifices won't be met with the proper gratitude, or the thanks she feels she so richly deserves.

Understanding this, the old priest—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.

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 that is Jesus.

The crushing happens not because me and the other miserable wretches come to an awful end; the crushing comes when I wake up and see that it is Jesus who comes to the awful end: and he’s done it for me, for you, and for the whole wide world.

You can’t face that truth and not be crushed, with gratitude and shame and relief.

Jesus gives himself over to be tortured and killed, and on the third day returns — not with revenge, but with forgiveness.

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

If everything I have is simply on loan from God to me, then the only thing to do is to share it with anyone and everyone in need.

This is what makes Jesus such a stumbling block, the rain 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 will 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 can accept 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 as brothers and sisters who deserve generosity.

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

Paul sees that the cross and resurrection are the pivot point of history, the fulcrum on which God moves the destiny of the whole universe — toward the joy dreamed of from the beginning of time.

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, meaning we can be glad and rejoice!

And there is one more thing.

We discover that life 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 does, 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*.

So go, you priests of *God*, go and do likewise!

+amen