

Sermon: Pentecost 18

Mr. Evans DeVries

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Year A

Isaiah 5:1-7

Psalm 80:7-14

Philippians 3:4b-14

Matthew 21:33-46

The question never really occurred to me in all the Sundays that I have occupied a pew and listened to discussions of the lessons of Jesus. However, as I started to look into this week's parable, I began to wonder: How many parables did Jesus tell? I began to search the Internet to find out. What I found was not really surprising. There is a great deal of disagreement about the answer. Some count the repetition of a parable in another gospel as a separate story, others count the repetition as one with the original. Where there are two parts to a parable, some count it as one while others count them as two entities. Some count parables in non-canonical gospels, like the Gospel of Thomas, others don't. The same is true for the "stories" in John's gospel. To some they count as parables, to others, no. After all my reading, my impression is that most of the people that I consulted believe that all the parables are found in the three synoptic gospels. While the range of number of parables went from a high of 56 to a low of 33, the number 46 seemed to have more "votes" over all. Out of however many parables one eventually agrees to, today's parable of the Wicked Tenants is one of only three that are found in all three of the synoptic gospels. The other two are the Mustard seed and the Sower.

Today's parable has two very separate parts. The first is the vineyard part. There have been criticisms leveled against this portion of the parable as being unrealistic and unlikely to have happened in Christ's day. One criticism says that after all the time, effort and expense put into the vineyard, it would be unlikely for the land owner to leave for another country. The counter to that is to note that such business dealings were relatively common in the vast expanse of the Roman Empire. Another criticism has to do with the sending of slaves to collect the landowner's due the second time and sending the landowner's son the third time. Some critics say that wouldn't have happened.

Others point out that the culture of the Middle East, especially at that time, was driven by shame and honor and that it was reasonable to believe that the tenants would be motivated to live up to their contract by social pressure. The other criticism of the authenticity of the “set up” of the parable deals with the idea that the tenants would somehow acquire the son’s inheritance if the tenants killed him. Some commentators say that wouldn’t happen, either. Actually, it could. In our legal system, today, there is a legal mechanism or process known as adverse possession. If a person were to appropriate your property for a period of time in an open and hostile fashion, that person could, after the elapse of the statutory period (usually 20 years), be named the owner of that portion of your property. There are similar mechanisms outside of the English Common Law system that we use. Outside of an adverse possession situation, non-family members in biblical time could inherit property. When the Lord speaks to Abram in Genesis 15:2, Abram says “Lord God what can you give me? I have no son, so my slave Eliezer from Damascus will get everything I own after I die.”(New Century Version). This particular version is complicated by questions as to Eliezer’s relationship with the house of Abram, moreover.

It is also important to note the timeframe at this point. The activities that are described in today’s gospel happen on Tuesday after Palm Sunday. Thursday night Jesus will be arrested and taken before the religious leaders. On Friday, he will die on the cross. In the meantime he has cleansed the Temple and has been teaching. Today’s exchange grows out of the demand from the religious leaders to know by what authority Jesus does all he’s doing. Tensions are running high and the leaders are becoming more exasperated by Jesus than they are afraid of the crowd’s reaction if they were to arrest Him. If, in reacting to today’s parable, the religious leadership identifies with the landowner, they are the ones who have been wronged by the tenants, but the moment they realize, as in Isaiah’s parable to which Jesus very obviously alludes, that it is God who is the landowner in the story and they, the religious leaders, are the bad guys, things get really tense, really fast. This is a much more obvious indictment of the leaders than we’ve seen before.

Scott Hoezee of Calvin Colleges' Center for Excellence in Preaching points out that the vineyard parable in Isaiah 5 foretold of the plowing under of God's vineyard, Israel, by the Babylonians. Hoezee says this was a turning point in God's dealings with the world. In today's reading, Jesus is saying that we have reached another such turning point with his parable built on Isaiah's.

After Jesus tells the portion of the story about the wicked tenants, he asks the leaders for their guess as to what the landowner would do to the tenants. The leaders respond that the Tenants will be removed and the care of the vineyard turned over to those who will do the right thing. At this point, Jesus quotes Psalm 118, "the stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone." and the characters and setting shift. Now, as the wicked tenants, the leaders find that the vineyard will be taken from them for their misdeeds and given to those who will produce the fruits of the kingdom. Also, at this point, the vineyard fades away and the the structure that is the true subject of the parable becomes clear. We are talking about the kingdom of God. The stone rejected by the religious leadership has, indeed become the corner stone of God's Kingdom.

Earlier, I said that this parable is one of only three that are in all the synoptic gospels. This suggests that the gospel writers believed something that is fundamental to our religious beliefs is contained herein. In the parable, the vineyard will be taken from the wicked tenants and given to more worthy tenants, i.e. the church to care for. In the past, some saw the church's inclusion of the Gentiles as that essential truth. Sadly, this passage of scripture has also been used to justify anti-Semitism in church history. St. John Chrysostom, in his commentary on Matthew, says that this parable shows that in Jesus we find "the calling of the Gentiles and the casting out of the Jews". More modern commentators have focused on seeing the tenants in the story not as just the religious leadership, but all of us. We are all stewards of the vineyard, of the kingdom. To blame the leadership diminishes our accountability and lets us "off the hook". I really can't believe that letting us avoid our responsibilities was what Christ had in mind.