

Sermon for October 4, 2014

Matthew 21:33

In today's Gospel reading Jesus is still answering the Pharisees' question about where he gets the authority to do the things he is doing. Authority plays a big part in this parable. We are much more like the tenants in the parable than we would like to admit. The tenants in the parable won't submit to the authority that the landowner has over them and won't give him the portion of the harvest that is due to him. We have just as hard of a time submitting ourselves to the authority that God has over our lives.

I tell people that I don't worry about nine of the ten commandments because I get stuck on the first one: I am the Lord your God, you shall have no other gods before me. Luther writes that this means we are to fear, love, honor, trust and obey God above **everything** else. I can do most of that except for the trust part. Too often I trust my own intelligence and my own hard work over trusting in God.

We tend to forget that everything we have, everything we are has been entrusted to us by God and we are to be stewards of it all. I've heard the critique that most Christians are functional atheists. We believe in God, but we live and act as if there were no God. What would our lives look like if we lived them like God was the ultimate authority in the whole of our lives—not just for two hours on a Sunday morning? What would it look like in our homes, in our schools, at our jobs, in our neighborhoods if we lived as if God was in charge?

We are called to make disciples of all people and one part of doing that is spreading the good news of the gospel to others. St. Francis of Assisi wrote that

we are to spread the gospel of Jesus Christ to the world and sometimes we might even use words! Words have a hollow ring to them when they aren't followed up by our actions. Matthew tells us in his gospel what our lives look like when God is our authority. We feed the hungry, clothe the naked, heal the sick, visit the prisoner, and welcome the stranger. When this happened in the early church their numbers grew because people wanted to be part of a community whose words were aligned with their actions.

Identity also plays a big part in this parable. The tenants derive their identity from thinking that the vineyard belongs to them just as the chief priests and elders get their identities from thinking that the Temple belongs to them because they are in charge of taking care of the Temple. When the slaves and the son of the landowner challenge their idea of ownership—they don't like it. If the vineyard doesn't belong to them, if this isn't where their identity comes from—who are they?

They are wildly possessive about this vineyard and who can blame them—they've probably put in about five years of work just to get the vineyard to produce. But then again we are possessive too about the things that are the most important to us. We say things like my family, my job, my body, my congregation. When the things we hold dear are challenged and possibly taken away from us, we feel threatened too. Who would we be without them?

But the tenants' identity doesn't come from the vineyard they are working; it comes from the landowner who after all they have done still trusts them to take care of what's been entrusted to them and wants to be in relationship with them.

This parable also speaks to the identity of the landowner. He sends multiple slaves and servants to collect what's due to him and they're beaten, stoned and killed. He doesn't then send armies to get what's his—he sends his unarmed son—alone; to most of us that sounds just a little crazy! In fact it fits Einstein's definition of insanity—doing the same thing over and over but expecting different results.

In some ways we do have a God who is insane—insanely in love with us and who desperately wants to have a relationship with us! No human would love us as God does or put up with everything that we do, but God does! Thankfully God doesn't follow our standards. God gives us chance after chance after chance to do the right thing. God will go to any length, even death on a cross and resurrection from the dead to show us just how much we are loved.

This is from where we derive our identity and this is whose authority we are called to follow. Thankfully God doesn't give up on us—no matter what we do!