

October 2, 2011: STEALING PEACE

Matthew 21:33-46; Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-21; Psalm 19

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Do people still use that question, “Who died and made you God?” It used to be a sometimes-affectionate invitation to return to humility, but usually it was asked of a person acting like they thought they were more important than others, by people who were miffed about it. Jesus is asked the Biblical equivalent of this question, and today’s parable is his response. The irony is that he’s asked this during the last week of his life, and each of the parables by which he responds builds and escalates on his assertion of authority over the questioners. Who died and made him God, indeed.

The parable is puzzling. What was that landowner thinking, building a vineyard and then disappearing? And then to repeatedly send messengers who got beat up and killed, and finally to stake everything on sending his own son! What was he *thinking*? A lot of people read this as an allegory: God is the landowner, Israel is the vineyard, the religious establishment is the wicked tenants, the Hebrew prophets are the messengers, Jesus is the landowner’s son. All allegories have limitations, but this one portrays God in a strange light. If God is the landlord, does this mean God “disappears” so that we grow into our responsibilities of stewardship—of the earth, our relationships, kingdom living—does God disappear so that we can bring those responsibilities to fruitfulness? Abandoning us to our own devices.

To the modern sensibility, landlords don’t improve their property and then up and disappear. It happened in the ancient world, but an absentee landlord violated Jewish religious law. Jesus’ original hearers had every right to expect him to conclude by fomenting a “just” or religiously-based revolution. There were plenty of Hebrew prophets who had given similar warnings to the landlords who had essentially stolen the land’s produce from tenants who worked the land, then exported what they had stolen as tribute payments to foreign powers. To Jesus’ original hearers, the absentee landlord could just as easily have meant Rome. That the son is sent was an indication that the landlord had died and killing the son (Herod or Pilate?) was the only impediment to self-determination through revolution.

Trickster that he is, Jesus invites his listeners into the room of allegory, sets them on the rug of their comfortable interpretive assumptions, and then pulls the rug out. When Jesus allegorizes his parable and applies it to Israel, the message is not land reform or uprising against Rome. The message, in this most Jewish of the gospels, is that God’s patronage will be taken from Israel and given to some other people that will produce the fruits required. The cycle of retaliation and violence, Jesus says, has got to stop. The fruits required are righteous living and justice. Accountabilities must be met, because God’s reign is coming, and that reign will be the non-violent exercise of power.

What accountabilities? The job of the tenants is to produce fruit and turn it over to the landlord. If you want to stay allegorical, for Jesus’ listeners, the fruit was living as the Ten Commandments required. You remember the Ten Commandments. Or, as we say in *Godly Play*, “The Ten Best Ways of Living.” We just re-wrote them during the children’s time. These rules for living together as a community of faith are still the spiritual discipline required of us. The daily prayer book I’m using these days¹ calls that kind of living, “the New Monasticism.” The writers urge us to understand that “if community doesn’t exist for something beyond [itself], it will atrophy, suffocate, die.”

Hence, the beauty of the arrangement of the Ten Commandments. The first four help us live as if there *is* something other than ourselves which is ultimate—God. The other six commandments guide our human relationships. There are many ways to be peacemakers, and the message of the Ten Commandments today is that “peacemaking” is the praxis and ethics of Christian discipleship—everyday spiritual disciplines—enacted in the concrete. All the ways of being peacemakers involve intentionality and discipline, living as if there is something beyond ourselves.

¹ *Common Prayer: A Liturgy for Ordinary Radicals* by Shane Claiborne, Johnathan Wilson-Hartgrove, and Enuma Okoro, Zondervan: Grand Rapids, Michigan; 2010.

What Jesus says in this parable is that, if his followers are not intentional about living as peacemakers, in community, doing justice, our “inheritance” will be given to others. Our “inheritance,” of course, is God’s reign, the kingdom come and coming, the Ten Commandments realized, God’s dream of a new humanity. To the Israelites just released from Egyptian slavery, the message of the Ten Commandments is, “You’ve already been delivered; so *live* this way!” Today, Peacemaking Sunday, read with the parable of the tenants who thought they could steal the inheritance, the message of the Commandments is still to work together to create a world in which it is easier to be good, a place where we are formed and transformed into God’s new creation.

Children's Time

Ten Commandments ("Ten Best Ways to Live"—with each other)

Do not serve other gods (there is a reason for existence beyond ourselves; God is beyond us, more than us)

Make no idols to serve (God is real and living—God is Person not just “a good idea”)

Do not speak my name lightly (treat God respectfully—and so learn to treat others that way)

Keep the Sabbath holy (we get a time to restore and rest and worship something beyond ourselves—not all of life is expedient and productive)

Honor your father and mother (we are entitled to receive nurture, to live as if we can learn something from others)

Do not kill (life is sacred)

Do not break your marriage (loyalty in relationship)

Do not steal (stuff is important; keep good boundaries)

Do not lie (honesty and truth-telling)

Do not want what others have (be satisfied with what you've got)