

Provoked by the Parables at Brentwood Presbyterian

The Tenants in the Vineyard

July 10, 2011

Psalm 118 and Matt 21:33-43
(Hymns – 420, 496, 79, 472)

It's a bit like a new Hollywood Western.

The locale is a rich and productive ranch,
with all the buildings and equipment needed for success.

The ranch is leased out to tenants.

The tenants on the ranch are greedy
and unwilling to honour their rental deal.

The owner sends some of his employees
to collect the rent at harvest time.

They are beaten and stoned.

One of them is killed.

The owner sends more employees.

The same things happens.

Finally, the owner sends his son,
convinced the tenants will respect him.

The tenants, however, figure this is their chance.

If they kill the son, they might get the property for themselves.

So they do.

I say it's a new Hollywood Western
because there is no real resolution in the story itself.
It's simply an account of the violence arises out of greed.
The bad guys seem to win and the good guys clearly lose.
It's not like the old Hollywood Westerns that I grew up on.

The good guys always won.

The only dramatic question was how.

To make sense of this parable,
we need to look at more than the story itself.
We need to look at its setting in Matthew's Gospel
and at the way Jesus uses the story
in his ongoing confrontation with the chief priests and Pharisees.

This is clearly intended to be a story
about Jesus' criticism of the ways in which the Jewish leaders of his time
were interpreting and practising their faith.
It was a prophetic condemnation of their views on being the people of God.

These leaders had been entrusted with the rich heritage of the Jewish tradition and they had distorted it into a defensive, narrow-minded religiosity that had little to do with the eternal love of God witnessed to so powerfully in Psalm 118.

This is also a story about the lengths to which these leaders would go to preserve their power and privileges.

They had beaten and killed the prophetic voices in their midst, those who called them to account for not remaining faithful to God's original covenant of being stewards of the creation who bless all peoples. Now God was sending his Son, the long-awaited Messiah, to remind and recall these leaders to authentic faithfulness, and they rejected him as well, convincing the Romans to crucify him.

Matthew uses this story late in his Gospel, after Jesus has arrived in Jerusalem to deliver his prophetic message about the kingdom of God's eternal love in the heart of the city controlled by the chief priests and Pharisees, leaders who were clinging to power in an exploitive religious system that largely ignored the core affirmations of the Jewish tradition.

What were those affirmations?

That God's love is eternal and that true security and safety for humans is found in that love.

That God chose and rescued a people to be his agents on earth, a blessing to all peoples by its example of leading their lives as individuals and their life as a community in an intimate relationship with God in the service of his intentions.

That God showed patience and persistence in calling and recalling his people to flourish in this faith – through the judges, the kings, the prophets, and finally the Messiah.

That God clearly revealed what is involved in living in his kingdom – understanding and practising God's constant love, justice and righteousness, the things in which he delights (Jer 9:24); and do what is just, show constant love, and walk in humble fellowship with God (Micah 6:8).

And what happens if we do not bear the proper fruits
of this genuine faithfulness to God?

If we do not find our ultimate security and safety in God's love,
if we do not remain faithful to God's intentions,
if we do not heed God's warnings and teachings in the prophets,
if we do not practise justice, righteousness, and humble intimacy with God,
then God will find and nourish a people that do.
We will not be killed in anger.
We will simply be allowed to wither
in our ignorance and arrogance.

So, how does this parable speak to us here at Brentwood.

First, it is a reminder of the patience of God's eternal love.
In that love, God does not anger easily or for long.
We are a community of God's beloved children
called to witness to and work for his kingdom on earth.

Second, in our relationship with God in Jesus Christ,
through the work of the Holy Spirit,
we are constantly being nourished to flourish
as God's blessing to the earth.
We testify to the power of a healthy Christian community
bound together in God's vitalizing love.

Third, if we do not respond to this grace with grateful service,
God will find others to be his people and do his work.
There is a responsibility that comes with these gifts
We are invited to live joyfully in the grace of Jesus Christ
and reach out into the power of that grace to serve others.

This parable encourages us to accept God's grace in Jesus Christ
and be God's people in the world,
especially in this neighbourhood around Brentwood.
We have a couple of special opportunities to do that this summer
with our community clean-up on August 6
and our community fair and BBQ on August 20.
In joyful faith at these events,
we will let people know who we are and what we are about.
We hope you can be with us and bring your friends.