

The Church of the Good Shepherd
Lexington, Kentucky
Sermon for October 2, 2011 ~ Proper 22A
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This is the time of year when the theme of the gospel readings in our services concerns the reign of God. In the parables of the Kingdom, Jesus tells his audience that life with God is the greatest treasure and cautions the most religious of us not to get too comfortable. Today's parable of the Wicked Tenants is just one example.

Jesus told this parable in order to give the religious leaders in his audience a jolt. It is a sharp, even harsh rebuke of the quality of life he found among those who were supposed to be the best examples of what life is like when it is lived in communion with God. Here, as in other places, Jesus uses an agricultural theme to make his point.

A landowner planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a wine press in it, and built a watchtower. Then he leased it to tenants and went to another country. When he sent representatives to collect the rent, which was a portion of the harvest, the tenant farmers beat, stoned, and killed them. When he sent others and the same thing happened to them. So, he sent his son. I'm not sure why the landowner thought they would treat the son any better than the others whom he had sent. In fact, they did not. The tenant farmers thought if they killed the son they could have his inheritance, that is, the vineyard. Jesus' finishes the parable with the question, "When the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?"

Of course, they knew the "right" answer: "He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the harvest time." At this point, Jesus turned the tables and said, "The kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom." Matthew says the crowd regarded Jesus as a prophet. They wanted to call the Commission on Ministry and say, "Let's make him a priest!" But the members of the Commission on Ministry were there and clearly offended. They wanted to arrest him, but were afraid to do so because the crowd might have turned on them.

What has this parable and this event in the life of Jesus and his followers to do with us? It all depends upon whether you identify with the owner of the vineyard, the stewards he sent to collect the rent, the son who was killed, the crowd to whom Jesus told his parable, or the Pharisees, who also heard it and were offended by it. Like the Ten Commandments, the Parable of the Wicked Tenants is set over against the community of God's people as a standard against which to measure the quality of the life we share.

Christians will not overlook the fact that when God sent his only Son, like the son in the parable, he was killed. And, like the landowner of the parable, God must have known what those to whom he sent his son were capable of.

So, here's the question for us today at The Church of the Good Shepherd in Lexington, Kentucky: When God arrives in our midst, will we have anything to show for the life he has given us? This is not fundamentally a question about a business transaction. It is a question that has to do with fecundity – the fruitfulness of our corporate life.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the Twentieth Century pastor and theologian, in his book *Life Together*, explores the essence of Christian community. Bonhoeffer describes the Church as “divine reality.” And he says that for the Church as a community of love to flourish it must be an empirical Church, i.e. an observable Church, one that is *really there*; not a romanticized or virtual community, not just in name or a grand idea. As “divine reality” Bonhoeffer differentiates the Christian community from any other human society and explains: “The Church community, not some philosophical or theological system of thought, is God’s final revelation of the divine self as Christ existing in community.” In other words, “don’t wait for a new revelation:” Christ *in you* – the Church – is it! It is not esoteric or mushy. Love in the community of believers is a divine reality that takes discipline and effort undergirded by God’s grace, with an intentionality that never gives up. The Church is not a business venture, a moneymaking or fund-raising group, an activity for Sunday mornings, a program for social welfare, or even a ministry. The Church is the *Body of Christ*, a gathering of believers amongst whom Jesus Christ is central and the reason for meeting.

It is what St. Paul had in mind when he wrote about wanting to “know Christ” as the supreme value that is more important than anything else in life. He calls the experience “life *in Christ*.” It is reflected in the prayer we often pray, when we say that “we are very members incorporate in the mystical body of thy Son, the blessed company of all faithful people; and are also heirs, through hope, of thy everlasting kingdom” – or, “Living members of the Body of your Son, and heirs of your eternal kingdom.”

God has expectations of those to whom eternal life has been given and accountability is built right in. Notice in the parable that everything necessary for fruitfulness was provided: the landowner planted the vines, cultivated the vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a wine press, and even built a watchtower. All the tenants had to do was manage and tend the vineyard so that it would produce fruit, then return some of it to the owner. They were stewards of what had been provided by the owner of the vineyard.

I have often wondered how the notion that stewardship is about saving ever entered the Church. Read the Bible. Stewardship is never about saving. It is always about seeds, sowing, planting, tending, watering, harvesting, and investing. Christian stewardship is about investing what God has entrusted to us in what matters to God and for the good of the world.

When Jesus says, “I am the vine, you are the branches. Apart from me you can do nothing,” he is speaking of the effects of being a “living member.” The fruit of that right relationship should be evident, recognizable, and bountiful. And what is that fruit? In his letter to the Galatians, St. Paul gives us a nine-point list of Christ-like attributes known as “The fruit of the Spirit” - love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

That is the fruit God desires from our life together, when we gather and when we are apart. We are not the owners of this vineyard. We don’t have to worry about our inheritance because we have already been incorporated into the life of the Son of God and given a full share in his inheritance. We are the tenants, and we already know that we have a vested interest. We are the stewards of everything God has placed in our hands. We come here week after week to celebrate our life in Christ and to provoke one another to be about those things that produce fruit – ripe, delicious, nutritious, bountiful life-giving fruit. May God give us grace to bear such fruit that is worthy of the Kingdom and share it with those who are hungry for it.