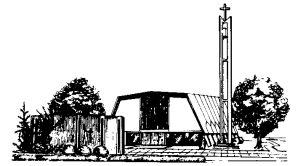


Campbell United Methodist Church
The Weekly Sermon



Practical Parables: *The Workers in the Vineyard*

Rev. Alan Jones
February 6, 2011
Matthew 21:33-42

Do you know the skit that goes:

Man 1: You must pay the rent!
Woman: I can't pay the rent!
Man 1: You must pay the rent!
Woman: I can't pay the rent!
Man 1: You must pay the rent!
Woman: I can't pay the rent!
Man 2: I'll pay the rent!
Woman: My Hero!

I hope that I won't live to regret saying this- but I always appreciate feedback about my sermons, both from those who appreciate what they have heard and those who don't. Most of the negatives come from people who are not so much critical of my preaching style and content, but they tell me that they want to hear more good news, more celebration, and more affirmation. And they may be right! After all- if the purpose of the exercise is for us all to change and grow, then we need to begin from feeling positively about ourselves.

The big snag here is that Jesus didn't have the benefit of contemporary educational models or parenting models. If there is a problem, he goes straight to the heart of the matter. No preparing the ground, no lulling us into a sense of warm fuzzy before he delivers the weighty message.

Before returning to the details of the story of the Workers in the Vineyard, there is another story that needs to be told first, and it isn't exactly a story of celebration and affirmation! The story is beautiful poetry in Isaiah chapter 5, but, be ready; the warm fuzzy doesn't last long:

Let me sing for my beloved
My love-song concerning his vineyard.
My beloved had a vineyard
On a very fertile hill.
He dug it and cleared it of stones,
And planted it with choice vines;
And built a watchtower in the midst of it
And hewed out a wine vat in it;

He expected it to yield grapes
But it yielded wild grapes.

God then says that he will destroy the vineyard and make it waste.

For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts
Is the house of Israel
And the people of Judah
Are his pleasant planting;
He expected justice,
But saw bloodshed;
Righteousness,
but heard a cry.

The poetry is exquisitely beautiful, and it continues for another twenty verses, but the judgment on Israel is crushing and total.

Those people who were standing and sitting around as Jesus told the parable of the workers in the vineyard would have this ancient vineyard story, already placed in the minds and hearts.

So there is a beautifully built vineyard, all ready to produce a good harvest. There is an absentee landlord, and a group of rebellious renters who don't want to pay the agreed-upon rent when harvest time comes. They apparently band together, and not only go on strike from paying the rent; they are proactive in sending a message to the landlord that they have no intention of paying. They torture and kill the messengers sent as rent collectors. What is totally perplexing in the story is the logic of the absentee landlord when he decides to send his son to collect the rent -and, of course, the tenants feel that they have little choice but to kill him, which they do.

So Jesus asks his audience So what should the owner of the vineyard do with these tenants? Their collective dander is definitely up and they say "Put them (not just to death but) to a miserable death, and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at harvest time."

You can hear the crowd crying out, yeah! Yeah! Quite right!

But then Jesus is quoted as saying something quite shocking: Have you never read the scriptures (Don't you people know your Bibles?!): The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord's doing, and it is amazing in our eyes.

So what begins as a story of crime and tragedy becomes a story of transformation.

Let me remind us all that all the parables are about transformation and change. They are all about the different life rules that operate in the Kingdom of Heaven, or the Kingdom of God. They are stories with multiple levels and facets of meaning. When you think you have found the one true meaning of the parable, immediately start looking for another. And in the interests of Biblical honesty, I have to say that Matthew, the writer of the story,

does put his own spin on the story in the verses that follow and it isn't the same interpretation that I will be sharing. So with apologies to brother Matthew, let's go back.

Rather than an external interpretation, I am inviting us during this serious to assume, at least for the moment, that these are parables about the inner life of the spirit.

So you are the vineyard, you are the landowner, yes-you are the irresponsible tenants, and yes, sadly, you are the servants who get roughed-up, stoned and killed.

When I say you, I include myself. I very much include myself, as I see how I often avoid taking responsibility for being a good tenant.

So I said you are the vineyard, your soul, your heart, your energy your spirit is the God-given opportunity that is your life and mine. We wouldn't have any of it without God's gracious sharing with us. Like ancient Israel, life is a covenant. Thank you God for providing for my needs and taking care of me through life, and in return, the rent I will pay is a faithful and obedient spirit.

So then we start to explore what is required to be a faithful disciple. What is on the list? And I know it's a list that makes us feel guilty. But guilt isn't needed. The old feelings are rejected. According to Jesus, and they are transformed to become the corner stone. I guess saying prayers, reading the Bible, putting the needs of other people first- building peace in the world, stopping domestic violence, violence on the streets, and morally sanctioned institutional violence in the form of war.

Isaiah doesn't pull any punches. He says:

Ah, you who call evil good
and good evil,
Who put darkness for light
And light or darkness,
Who put bitter for sweet
and sweet for bitter.

Isaiah has already announced to us God's disdain for well-organized church worship services in the absence of justice. He says (1:17):

Learn to do good:
Seek justice:
Rescue the oppressed,
Defend the orphan,
Plead for the widow.

We are in the process of recovering from a terrible financial crisis that has scared us all, rich and poor alike. We have poured billions of dollars into saving our financial institutions, and have ensured that the relatively wealthy are protected. Most of us complain about finances, but truthfully, most of us, with a few exceptions, are not living on the edge.

Rates of hunger and poverty within the United States are at an historic high, and around the world children are still dying every minute, because the world chooses to pour hundreds of billions to secure our financial institutions, and mysteriously cannot find the few billions required to stop people from starving to death.

We still live in a world where violence is the norm, and more violence as seen as the best remedy. We still have every member of congress defending a defense contract within their own elected area in order to confirm their election. We still have power being purchased by big business at the expense of the poor. Don't even think about organizing for a national living wage ordinance, guaranteeing a fair days wage for a fair days work. And in California, the widows and orphans mentioned by Isaiah are at the top of the list of Governor Brown's budget cuts for 2011.

And then there is Haiti, the on-going tragedy on the Gulf Coast, Brazil floods, war in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the fear of terrorism. The list gets longer and longer and we feel ourselves drowning in an unending ocean of human need. The rent collectors just keep coming!

Yes, it's true; the rent collectors for the Kingdom of God keep coming. They are within you and me. This is the bad news. The rent collectors are those feelings of guilt when we consider living differently and focusing on the needs of people who are poor or oppressed. We say I wish I could help, but I don't see what I can do- and then we are left feeling guilty.

And to really turn the knife in our spiritual wound, even the son comes, saying Come on, time to pay up! And we kill off even that last appeal to our own goodness.

But wait- you are missing the final words of Jesus. Jesus disputes with his listeners the final outcome of his story. He says that the rejected stone becomes the corner stone. Those guys who stole and did violence to protect their way of life are capable of transformation. There truly is another way and it is the way of the Kingdom of God.

The Kingdom of god recognizes the shortcomings of the world around us, and works to bring healing and change. Jesus spoke about bring good news to the poor, recovery of sight to the blind and liberty to all who are oppressed. Conquering the triple horrors of poverty, illness and oppression may seem like a large agenda, but when broken down into pieces it is certainly do-able.

I found myself profoundly challenged recently by hearing Dr. Izzeldin Abuelaish speak. His extraordinary man has devoted his life to bringing healing to bother Palestinians and Israelis. As a Gaza resident, he deliberately subjects himself to the daily indignities of passing through the check-point between Israel and Gaza to go and work in an Israeli hospital. Many Israelis are suspicious of him. Many Palestinians don't understand why he puts so much effort into healing and helping those people who are their enemies.

Dr. Abuelaish has written a book entitled I Shall not Hate, and he continues to insist that Palestinians and Israelis share the reality that they are all victims of their history; and building relationships of family love and trust, starting with the work of a caring doctor is the way ahead to restore health. He understands what it means to pay rent joyfully and lovingly. And, of course, he is a faithful Muslim.

What makes his story even more extraordinary is the fact that three of his daughters and a niece were in his home in Gaza on the night of January 16th 2009, and they were all killed by an Israeli tank shell which hit the bedroom of their home.

So our call today is to do the work of inner exploration- to find out who inside us resists paying our rent, taking our part in the task of kingdom building. The Kingdom of Heaven is within you says Jesus, the Kingdom of Heaven is among you. It's a great promise with a tremendous reward.