

Preaching for Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd, Reno, NV

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Date: October 8, 2023, Year A, 19th Sunday after Pentecost

Text: Matthew 21:33-46

Title: Entrusted with the Vineyard

Focus: This challenging, even disturbing, parable urges us to consider how we view ownership and the things which are entrusted to us. God has provided gifts which should produce justice and righteousness, yet we often mistreat and squander these gifts. How do we see ourselves in this parable and how do we see God?

Gospel Text from Matthew 21:33-46

[Jesus said to them,] ³³“Listen to another parable. There was a landowner who 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. ³⁴When the harvest time had come, he sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his produce. ³⁵But the tenants seized his slaves and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. ³⁶Again he sent other slaves, more than the first; and they treated them in the same way. ³⁷Finally he sent his son to them, saying, ‘They will respect my son.’ ³⁸But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, ‘This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance.’ ³⁹So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him. ⁴⁰Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?” ⁴¹They said to him, “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.” ⁴²Jesus said to them, “Have you never read in the scriptures: ‘The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord’s doing, and it is amazing in our eyes’? ⁴³Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom. ⁴⁴The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls.” ⁴⁵When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they realized that he was speaking about them. ⁴⁶They wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowds, because they regarded him as a prophet.

Leaders Confronting Jesus

- “By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?” (Matthew 21:23).

That’s how “chief priests and the elders of the people”—religious leaders—confronted Jesus. He had provoked them by entering the temple area and driving out the money changers there. These leaders were angry about it—“What gives you the authority—the right—to do such things,” they asked.

When people challenged Jesus, he often responded with a parable. If they stubbornly persisted in their rigidity, he often told them a second parable.

This is a difficult parable.

Last week, Dale mentioned some of his favorite parables. The reading from last week, a parable about the two sons who were asked to go work in the vineyard by their father, was not on his favorite list. Today's parable probably isn't a favorite, either, I'm sure most of us would say.

This week's parable is disturbing. It includes greed, power moves, and acts of violence, to the extreme of premeditated murder. That both these stories/parables would be on the "Not Favorite List" is not surprising given that, as I said, they are both told in response to the same situation of people challenging him or having a dispute with him. "We're in charge around here!" they seemed to declare. "How dare you!"

So, Jesus told these back-to-back parables to talk about the kingdom of God and help people see themselves more clearly. (Maybe as we puzzle through the parable we can see ourselves more clearly, too.)

A Landowner, Tenants, and a Vineyard. . .

The central relationship in the story is between the landowner and the tenants. The setting of the parable—its central characters, the connection among them, the circumstance in which they operated—all of these would have been understood by Jesus' first hearers as the situation was commonplace in Roman-occupied Palestine.

The landowner

- Provided the land.
- Planted the vineyard.
- Put a fence around it.
- Dug a wine press in it.
- Erected the tower (apparently to keep it safe/keep watch)
- . . . and then goes away.

The tenants leased the property to work the vineyard. They oversaw overseeing the productivity of the vineyard and paying their rent to the owner at harvest time, in the form of a share of the produce.

What was the purpose? The landowner's intent or expectation for the land/vineyard is that it would produce crops/grapes. You have inputs like land/soil, seed or vines, labor, water, and sunshine and you should have an output of good fruit.

Another Owner-Leaseholder Relationship

I don't have everything in the parable figured out. . . It's a challenging passage. And, as we have said before about parables, their complexity is in part the point. Jesus intended the parables he told to get us thinking and to have his hearers continue to

puzzle it over, to ponder it. So, because the circumstance or relationship is landowner to leaseholder occupying a particular property, I want to tell you a story about another property and a relationship between a landholder and tenants or leaseholders.

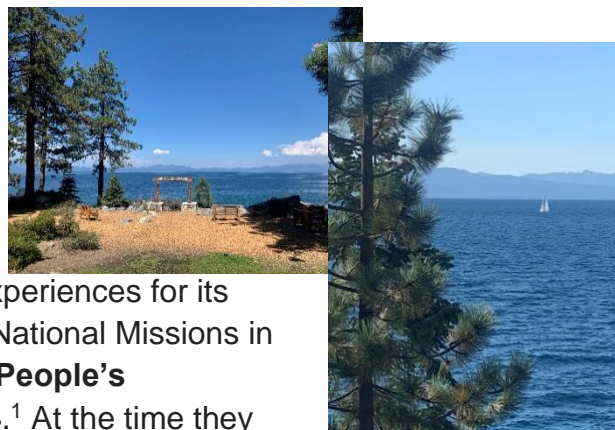
Zephyr Point

I was on the grounds at Zephyr Point last month, the Presbyterian Conference Center on the shores of Lake Tahoe. Its history includes a relationship between landowner and leaseholders.



- Here is a picture of me at the Portal of Prayer
- The same view, but from a distance. . .
- And the view *from* the Portal of Prayer

The first event at Zephyr Point was held in 1924. Zephyr Point's history began during the Roaring Twenties when the Presbyterian Synod of California was contemplating new and inspirational experiences for its young people. Dr. Robert Donaldson of the Board of National Missions in San Francisco Presbytery scheduled the first **Young People's Conference at Lake Tahoe for the summer of 1924.**¹ At the time they made the promise to host the event, they didn't even have a location or property.



- Through Rev. Harvey of Carson City, they later identified a property, but needed a loan of over \$5000 to pay for it.

In order to raise money to pay for this property, **the group decided to “auction” 10-year leases to Presbyterians** who wanted land to camp or build a cabin for the summer months. Commissioner Rev. Otis Linn and his college student intern, Bill Clawson, marked off lots, driving white painted stakes for boundaries. Lots were roughly 30 feet wide, varying because of rocks, steep terrain, and the inexperience of the “surveyors.” During “Homestead Week” July 31-August 6, 1925, each person drew a number, and he/she selected a lot of his/her choice based on their randomly selected number. The lakefront lots obviously were chosen first, but most people were satisfied with their draw. **The lots were to be returned to the Synod in 1935—a ten-year term.** That's when the leases were due to expire. That's what everyone agreed to. And yet the leases kept getting extended into new terms. Until the 1980s . . . when “[the governing

¹ This and subsequent sections are summarized or excerpted from the Zephyr Point website. <https://zephyrpoint.org/about/our-history/>

commissions] voted that the leases entered into in 1986 would be non-renewable. The final leases expired on January 1, 2001.”

In Summary. . .

The leases were offered to Presbyterian ministers and missionaries or other church leaders and their families. The money generated from the leases would allow the synod to pay off the loan for the purchase of the property.

The purpose of the property was to provide a place of rest and renewal, a place apart for reconnection with God. (Or restate using current mission.)

- **Current Mission: “. . . inviting all to experience God through education, exploration, and inspiration.”**

The leases were initially for a period of 10 years, but the leases were renewed. After families built cabins and leases were extended multiple times, those families understandably got accustomed to coming to the lake every summer and creating special memories with each other. I would guess that their expectations were revised to assume that the synod would *a/ways* extend the leases.

- After all, they were extended from 1925 and that initial 10-year period.

The leaseholders must have begun to feel like the property belonged to them and that they could do as they chose. Their families had been there for decades. They created special memories.

But there came a time **1986—as stated on the website**--when the synod’s leadership commissions determined that it would not continue to extend the leases. And there was a dispute.²

What are the terms of the lease?

I’m sure these two stories (of the parable and the synod and the leaseholders at Zephyr Point) do not overlap entirely, but there are some parallels to consider.

In the Zephyr Point story, I don’t mean to vilify the leaseholders—they helped establish the property and they contributed to its mission. Zephyr Point could not or would not have been developed in the same way without them. At the same time, the story illustrates how expectations change over time—expectations changed about the lease and its terms or the rights of each party.

In both stories. . .

- The intent or use of the property was clear to both the landowner and the tenants/leaseholders.

² See the ZP history section of the website.

- Produce a crop.
- An extension of the mission of the church as a place to gather for spiritual renewal.
- The lease--An agreement or terms were understood describing rights for both parties.
- Expectations changed over time
 - In the parable, the tenants outright abused the relationship. They even managed to persuade themselves that if they killed the son, they could take the inheritance. They were determined to take what did not belong to them.
 - The ZP leaseholders did nothing dastardly. The original lease term was 10 years, but when that term was extended and others following it were extended, their expectations changed. And, of course, they erected the cabins and enjoyed the beauty of the setting over time, and they expected to continue to be there to enjoy the property.

The intent of the parable

Last week, Dale Ressler was the preacher and addressed a difficult passage with insight. One of the things that I liked that he said/did was identify both the good news and the challenge in the passage. He said that the question he asks most frequently question in the Tuesday Bible study is, “Where is the good news in this passage?”

- And he also said. . . “I also think scripture should be challenging us, just as Jesus was constantly challenging the people of his time. We are not called to be stagnant in our faith or the way in which we live out that faith. Rather, God wants us to grow. To change.”

Good News and Challenge

In the same way, as Jesus told this week’s parable back-to-back with last week’s, there is some good news or grace and plenty of challenge.

The good news in this passage is not obvious or clear cut. I see the good news in recognizing that the landowner has provided everything that is needed for the crops to grow. That indicates to me the generosity of God. God has provided everything we need to flourish. I see also that the landowner offers second and third chances.

The challenging part: I think the challenging part of this text is good news, too, but it is a harder message for us to hear or bear. In the Tuesday Bible Study discussion of this passage, we saw some parallels in this text to the parenting relationship:

- A loving parent wants what is best for the child (whatever age the “child” may be)

- Like the landowner, the parent seeks to provide all the resources that are needed to do well.
- The parent is disappointed and sometimes hurt when the child (of whatever age) makes what you might call “bad choices.”
- The parable alludes to times in scripture when people grew disobedient, rebelled against God, disregarded the law, and killed God’s prophets. Over and over again, the people are given opportunity to give God what is God’s. Over and over again the people fail to recognize their place in relationship to God.
 - In the midst of this, the good news is that God refuses to give up.
- The parent offers support, counsel, additional chances.
 - The landowner offers second and third chances—sending other servants, even sending his own son.
- And, at what point, perhaps with reluctance, is it also necessary for the parent, in love, to hold that child (of whatever age) accountable.
 - That’s the hard, but necessary part.
 - This is a hard lesson about choices, actions, and consequences.
 - And while that message is hard to hear, isn’t it rooted in love?

As we hear the hard message in the parable, here are a few things to continue to think about:

- As we consider our place in the story, no matter with whom we may identify, the vineyard does not belong to us. All we have is on loan. We are entrusted with its care and obligated to turn over its bounty to the one who planted, dug, put up the fence and put in the press.³
- We often fail to hear and heed God’s message and God’s messengers.
- No matter who we are in the story, we are called to follow God’s law, fulfilled in Jesus, who teaches not only to love those who love us, but to bless those who persecute us, to go the extra mile, to give our coat and our shirt.

Why did Jesus tell parables? In part, the storytelling helped people see themselves more clearly.

Did you notice that at the close of the parables the religious leaders of the day, the chief priests, and the Pharisees, realized that Jesus had been talking about them? (Matthew 21:45)

Maybe we who are the religious of our day need some help seeing ourselves more clearly, too. Thanks be to God—may we have the wisdom and insight to see ourselves more clearly.

³ Thanks to Jill Duffield for her insight here. Commentary on the text posted Oct. 6, 2017 at “Looking into the Lectionary” at *The Presbyterian Outlook*. <https://pres-outlook.org/2017/10/18th-sunday-pentecost-october-8-2017>