

Matthew 21: 33-46

LOVING GOD, YOU SET BEFORE US THE GOAL OF NEW LIFE IN CHRIST. MAY WE LIVE IN THE POWER OF HIS RESURRECTION AND BRING FORTH THE FRUIT OF YOUR GENTLE AND LOVING RULE. AMEN.

OVER THE PAST MONTH I HAVE SPENT A LARGE QUALITY OF TIME THINKING ABOUT BOOK BANNING AND REFLECTED BACK ON THE BOOKS I WOULD HAVE LOVED SOMEONE TO BAN WHILE I WAS IN HIGH SCHOOL! LIKE MANY AMERICAN HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS IN THE EARLY 1980'S, MY JUNIOR ENGLISH CLASS WAS ASSIGNED JOHN STEINBECK'S "THE GRAPES OF WRATH". I BOTH LOVED AND LOATHED IT. THE VIOLENCE, THE INJUSTICES, THE HUMAN CRUELTY, BROKE MY HEART, WHILE AT THE SAME TIME, THE GLIMPSE OF GRACE AND HOPE IN THE NOVEL FILLED MY HEART. THE BEGINNING OF THE STORY IS ALMOST APOCALYPTIC, WITH DESCRIPTIONS OF THE SUN-PARCHED EARTH OF A LATE SUMMER'S DAY IN OKLAHOMA, WHERE THE CROPS ARE WITHERING AND WHERE GENTLE BREEZES BLOW UP INTO FIERCE, DUST-CHOKED WINDS.

MY FEELINGS ABOUT OUR GOSPEL READING THIS MORNING MIRROR MY TEEN-AGED RESPONSE TO STEINBECK. MAYBE IT WAS THE VIOLECE, THE HUMAN CRUELTY, THE SEVERITY OF THE TEXT THAT HAS STIRRED MY FEELINGS. THE HARSH JUDGEMENT AS WELL AS THE BRUTALITY AGAINST THE SERVANTS IN THESE VERSES HAS PREVENTED THIS FROM BEING ONE OF MY FAVORITE PARABLES OF JESUS.

THIS PARABLE IS ONE OF THREE THAT MATTHEW REPORTS JESUS TELLING AS A COMPETE SET. NEW TESTAMENT SCHOLARS OFTEN REFER TO THIS AS THE "CONTROVERSY SECTION." MATTHEW SETS THESE PARABLES IN THE MIDST OF THREE CONFLICT STORIES INVOLVING JESUS AND THE JEWISH RELIGIOUS AUTHORITIES AFTER HE ARRIVES IN JERUSALEM. CHRIST HAS OVERTURNED THE TABLES OF THE MONEY CHANGERS IN THE TEMPLE. THE VERY NEXT DAY, JESUS CURSES THE FRUITLESS FIG TREE, CAUSING IT TO WITHER. WHEN HE ENTERS THE TEMPLE AGAIN, THE CHIEF PRIESTS AND THE ELDERS QUESTION JESUS' AUTHORITY, AND HE RESPONDS WITH A TRIO OF PARABLES. THE VERSES FOR HIS MORNING, THE MIDDLE

PARABLE, TELLS THE STORY OF THE VINEYARD OWNER, HIS SERVANTS, AND THE WICKED TENANTS.

SO, WHAT IN THE WORLD WAS IT THAT CAUSED SUCH WRATH, SUCH HATRED, IN THE VINEYARD? WHY DID THE TENANTS BEAT, STONE, AND KILL THE SERVANTS WHO HAD COME TO COLLECT THE HARVEST FOR THE LANDOWNER?

WE HEAR IN THIS PARABLE OF A LANDOWNER WHO HAS PLANTED A VINEYARD, LEASED IT TO TENANTS, AND LEFT FOR ANOTHER COUNTRY. IN JESUS' TIME, BIBLICAL SCHOLARS TELL US THAT IT WOULD TYPICALLY BE FIVE YEARS BEFORE THE LANDOWNER WOULD EXPECT TO RECEIVE HIS FIRST PAYMENT. SO, LETS IMAGINE FOR A MOMENT WE ARE THE TENANTS. AND FOR THE LAST FIVE YEARS WE HAVE WORKED HARD IN THE VINEYARD, AND IT HAS PRODUCED MUCH FRUIT. AND NOW, AFTER FIVE YEARS WITHOUT A SINGLE WORD FROM THE LANDOWNER, THERE SUDDENLY APPEARS SOME SERVANTS OF HIS TO COLLECT THE LANDOWNERS PRODUCE. WE MAY HAVE BEGUN TO THINK AND SECRETLY HOPE THESE SERVANTS WOULD NEVER APPEAR. THAT THE LANDOWNER HAD FORGOTTEN ALL ABOUT HIS VINEYARD. THAT WE MIGHT GET TO KEEP IT ALL FOR OURSELVES. AFTER ALL, IT'S BEEN FIVE YEARS. BUT HERE THESE SERVANTS ARE, DEMANDING HIS PRODUCE.

NOW, I DON'T WANT TO EXCUSE THE ACTIONS OF THOSE TENANTS. BUT I DO WANT US TO SEE THAT IT'S NOT SO GREAT A STRETCH TO THINK THAT THESE TENANTS REALLY BEGAN TO BELIEVE THEY *OWNED* THE VINEYARD. ISN'T THAT ALWAYS A DANGER FOR STEWARDS WHEN THEY HAVEN'T SEEN THE OWNER IN A LONG TIME?

IT'S REASONABLE TO ASSUME THE TENANTS LIVING IN THAT BEAUTIFUL, LUSH GARDEN, HAD COME TO VIEW IT AS THEIR OWN. OWNERSHIP ISSUES ARE AT STAKE AND OWNERSHIP ISSUES CAN CAUSE ANGER, FEAR, AND HATRED. OUR HUMAN INSTINCT IS TO PROTECT WHAT WE VIEW AS OURS AND SO IT IS NOT ALL THAT SURPRISING THAT AND ANGER AND HATRED CONSUMED THE TENTANTS WHO WERE INTENT ON KEEPING THE VINEYARD FOR THEMSELVES.

I REMEMBER A SUNDAY MORNING AS I ARRIVED AT CHURCH TO FIND A MAN, I'LL CALL LYLE, WAITING FOR ME IN THE ENTRANCE. LYLE HAD FIRE IN HIS EYES AND A SCARY EDGE TO HIS

VOICE. HE TOLD ME THERE WAS A MAN SLEEPING IN THE FRONT OF THE BUILDING AND I NEEDED TO CALL THE POLICE ASAP AND HAVE THE MAN ARRESTED FOR LOITERING. SINCE I HAD ENTERED THROUGH ANOTHER ENTRANCE I HAD NOT SEEN THE MAN.

“IS HE HARMING ANYTHING?” I ASKED.

“NO, BUT HE MIGHT SCARE PEOPLE AWAY FROM WORSHIP.” “HE HAS NO BUSINESS BEING HERE. HE’S TRESPASSING. THIS IS MY CHURCH AND HE NEEDS TO BE REMOVED.”

STILL TRYING TO REMAIN CALM, I COULD FEEL MY OWN ANGER SURFACING. “LYLE, THIS ISN’T *YOUR* CHURCH. THE THINGS IN THIS PLACE DO NOT BELONG TO YOU OR TO ANYONE. IT IS GOD’S CHURCH AND I DON’T BELIEVE THE MAN IS HURTING ANYTHING BY BEING OUTSIDE. DID YOU ASK HIM IF HE NEEDED ANYTHING? DID YOU ASK IF WE COULD HELP HIM IN ANYWAY?

WITH THIS, HIS FACE GOT REDDER. “I THINK YOU NEED TO CALL THE POLICE.” WITH THIS, HE TURNED AND WENT ANOTHER WAY. AS I MADE MY WAY THROUGH THE SANCTUARY TO THE FRONT DOORS TO MEET THE SLEEPING MAN, I MET ANOTHER MEMBER OF THE CHURCH, RACHEL, WHO WAS WALKING TOWARDS THE FRONT DOORS AS WELL. AS SHE BALANCED A CUP OF HOT COFFEE AND 2 DONUTS, SHE EXPLAINED SHE WAS TAKING THE SMALL BREAKFAST TO A GENTLEMAN OUTSIDE ON THE FRONT STEPS.

LIKE THE TENANTS IN THE VINEYARD, LYLE, AND, IN ALL HONESTY, MANY MEMBERS OF CONGREGATIONS ALL AROUND THE WORLD, THINK THAT THE CHURCH BELONGS TO THEM. THAT THE CHURCH IS THEIRS.

OWNERSHIP HAS LONG BEEN THE AMERICAN WAY. MOST OF US IN THIS COUNTRY BELIEVE IN OWNERSHIP, AUTONOMY, AND SELF-RELIANCE. THESE ARE THE VALUES WE STRIVE TO LIVE BY. THE PARABLE IS ABOUT THE FEAR AND ANGER AND FEELING OF NOT-ENOUGH-FOR-ALL THAT PRODUCED HATRED; THE HATRED THAT CONSUMES PEOPLE WHO BELIEVE THEY ARE THE RIGHTFUL OWNERS OF THE COMMONWEALTH OF GOD.

WE ALL WANT TO BE OWNERS. WE HAVE A VERY HARD TIME BEING FAITHFUL TENANTS. BUT, ACCORDING TO JESUS' PARABLE, GOD WANTS US TO BE TENANTS WHO WILL OFFER UP THE PRODUCE AT THE HARVEST TIME.

WE ARE THE STEWARDS OF GOD'S VINEYARD. WE HAVE BEEN ENTRUSTED WITH THIS WORLD, WITH ALL THAT WE HAVE, AND ARE NOW CALLED TO CARE FOR IT WELL, AND TO GIVE OUR CREATOR THE FRUITS OF OUR HARVEST.

AND THIS PARABLE IS ALSO WARNING US NOT TO TAKE ANY OF THIS FOR GRANTED. OUR WORLD, OUR LIVES, OUR SALVATION...IT IS ALL GRACE, ALL A GIFT FROM GOD. WE, TOO, CAN BE TEMPTED AT TIMES TO THINK THAT WE CAN KEEP THE FRUITS OF GOD'S VINEYARD FOR OURSELVES. WE WORK HARD, MAKING OUR LIVING AND PROVIDING FOR OURSELVES AND OUR FAMILY, AND IT'S EASY TO FORGET THAT EVERYTHING WE HAVE IS NOT OURS, BUT THE LORD'S. WHEN OUR TWO-YEAR-OLD GRANDCHILDREN ARE TOGETHER PLAYING, A WORD YOU WILL HEAR REPEATED OFTEN IS: "MINE". WE LEARN IT AT A YOUNG AGE AND IT REAPPEARS THROUGHOUT OUR LIVES.

THINGS HAVE NOT CHANGED SO MUCH SINCE THE TIME OF ISAIAH AND JESUS. THE THEMES STEINBECK PRESENTS IN *THE GRAPES OF WRATH* ARE AS RELEVANT TODAY AS THEY WERE DURING THE 1930'S. HISTORICAL, SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC CIRCUMSTANCES SEPARATE PEOPLE INTO RICH AND POOR, LANDOWNERS AND TENANTS, AND THE PEOPLE IN DOMINANT ROLES STRUGGLE TO PRESERVE THEIR POSITIONS OF POWER. WE HAVE SEEN IT PLAY OVER AND OVER AGAIN: FEAR, ANGER, AND HATRED LEAD TO VIOLENCE AND DEATH.

THE LANDOWNER OF OUR VINEYARD STILL HASN'T RETURNED, OVER 2,000 YEARS LATER. WHETHER OR NOT WE SHARE THE FRUITS OF OUR HARVEST WITH THOSE IN NEED, WE WILL PROBABLY NOT BE STRUCK DOWN BY LIGHTNING. AND WHETHER OR NOT WE ARE NICE TO OUR NEIGHBORS THIS WEEK, WE WILL PROBABLY NOT RECEIVE A VISIT FROM THE OWNER OF THE VINEYARD TO RECEIVE THE CONSEQUENCES. WHETHER OR NOT WE HAVE LIVED SELFISHLY THIS WEEK, WE PROBABLY WON'T NOTICE ANY IMMEDIATE CONSEQUENCES FROM OUR HEAVENLY FATHER.

BUT THEN AGAIN, NONE OF US ARE GUARANTEED TOMORROW. TODAY IS ALL THAT WE CAN BE CERTAIN OF. SO WHY WOULD WE PUT OFF LIVING FAITHFULLY AS GOD'S STEWARD UNTIL TOMORROW, IF WE CAN DO IT TODAY? WHY? THERE CAN REALLY ONLY BE ONE REASON— WE WOULD DO THIS ONLY IF WE BELIEVED THE LANDOWNER WOULD NEVER RETURN. WHEN IT COMES RIGHT DOWN TO IT, THIS IS A PARABLE ABOUT FAITH, ABOUT THE IMPORTANCE OF BELIEIVING THAT GOD IS VERY REAL. THIS WORLD IS A VINEYARD THAT IS NOT OWNED BY US. WE HAVE A LANDOWNER WHO HAS ENTRUSTED US WITH IT, AND WILL ONE DAY HOLD US ACCOUNTABLE TO THIS TRUST. GOD HAS GIVEN US A BEAUTIFUL VINEYARD TO CARE FOR, BUT IT'S NOT OUR VINEYARD. MAY WE LIVE AS FAITHFUL TENANTS CARING FOR ALL WHICH BELONGS TO GOD. AMEN.