Sermon for the 18th Sunday after Pentecost

October 4, 2020

Matthew 21:33-46

 Today’s text from Matthew is a hard one to hear. It’s confusing. It’s difficult for us to find the good news, the gospel, in this passage.

 It’s often our instinct to try to skip over the hard or confusing teachings of Jesus. Or to soften them, to make what Jesus says more palatable, easier for us to hear, easier for us to accept, making our discipleship an easier task.

 We might even find ourselves thinking, “We live in different times. Jesus’ world was different. Maybe we don’t need to take this teaching as literally today.”

Yet there is a timeless quality to the parables, to the teachings of Jesus, and we do them a disservice if we try to make them something we’re more comfortable hearing, something *easier* for us to do. Just as they were meant to do 2000 years ago, Jesus’ words are meant to challenge us, to make us uncomfortable, to push us out of our comfort zones, because that’s the only way we can grow in our discipleship. And by challenging us, Jesus reminds us that we are in need of God’s mercy and grace, because we can’t possibly live up to what is asked of us.

 So just what is Jesus trying to tell us in this parable?

 To understand a parable, we have to look at the reason Jesus told it. We heard that last week, in the passage immediately preceding today’s.

The chief priests and elders challenged Jesus, demanding to know by what authority he did the things he did, and who gave him that authority. When they refuse to answer Jesus’ question about where the baptism of John came from – a heavenly origin or a human origin – Jesus declines to answer their question and tells a parable about two sons: one who says he’ll do as his father asks, but then doesn’t, and one who says he won’t do as his father asks, but then does.

 In today’s text, Jesus offers another parable, about tenants refusing to give the harvest owed to the owner of the land they work on, and seeking to claim it for themselves.

 Jesus tells his story in a way that ties it to another reading we hear today, the passage from Isaiah. The chief priests and elders would have known that Isaiah delivered an indictment of the people for not producing the fruit that God expected of them.

 This time, though, the fruit was being produced, but the people who are entrusted with the care and nurture of the vineyard weren’t doing what they ought to do. Instead of remembering that the vineyard wasn’t theirs and accepting the owner’s authority, they lay claim to the property *and* the fruit of its vines.

 What Jesus is getting at here is that the chief priests and elders had a job. They were to tend to the well-being of the people of God. But instead of doing that, they were more concerned with their own well-being, their own comfort. We have a reminder of that at the end of our reading, when we hear that the chief priests and elders realized Jesus was talking about them and wanted to arrest him, but were afraid of the crowds, who regarded Jesus as a prophet.

 The puzzling part of the story, where the tenants kill the owner’s son so they can keep the land themselves is the harshest part of the story. Because here Jesus is telling them that they are rejecting *him*, the Son of God, in an attempt to retain their own authority, their own comfortable lives.

Those who were able to rise to the level of chief priest or elder were wealthy and powerful people. The people who sought to restrain Jesus’ ministry, to tame his words, had grown far more interested in their own status than in the well-being of those whose care was entrusted to them.

 While it may be tempting to see this as solely an indictment of the chief priests and elders, we should always be careful when reading a parable allows us to point fingers at people other than ourselves. The message was not solely for the chief priests and elders. There were others there to hear it, including the disciples.

 Genesis tells us that God created all that is, and that God entrusted the role of stewardship of creation to humans. We are *all* charged with this role, called to work for the well-being of God’s good creation, which includes each other. Each of us has a unique role to play in the work God is up to in the world.

 But all too often, we are more concerned with our own well-being, our own comfort, our own pursuit of power, than our role of stewardship or discipleship.

 This passage, then, serves as a reminder to us that, like the chief priests and elders, we need to reorient our hearts, redirect our work, so that we are serving the well-being of God’s creation, not our own selfish interests.

 As disciples of Jesus, we’re meant to try to follow his teachings, even when they’re hard, because that’s how we grow. That’s how we are transformed by God’s love and mercy and infinite patience. Just as the owner of the vineyard offered multiple opportunities for the tenants to do the right thing, God does not tire of offering us opportunities to choose the right path.

 Ultimately, ***that’s*** the good news here. But it’s delivered with a reminder that choosing the wrong path, choosing our own comfort, our own selfish interests, our own pursuit of power is denying what God has called us to do, denying God’s authority over us, and declaring we know better than God.

 And there’s really no way for me to make that an easier thing for you to hear, because softening that message would mean I wasn’t doing the work I’ve been called to do.

 Each of us has a calling and each of us has a responsibility to remember that we are a part of God’s creation, entrusted with its care. We have been given gifts by God for the benefit of the common good, not so we can seek power or status or comfort.

We are to bear fruit – compassion, kindness, gentleness, joy, peace. Jesus is to be the cornerstone of our lives, the foundation of how we make our choices and live our lives.

Our faith is not meant to be something we just speak about, it is not supposed to be theoretical, but put into practice. We must, as the saying goes, walk the walk, not just talk the talk. As the tenants in this parable, we are called upon to accept God's authority over us, to seek out what God's will is for our lives, and give to God what we owe God – gratitude, obedience, and love that come from our hearts.

 Let us pray: Into your hands, almighty God, we place our selves: our minds to know you, our hearts to love you, our wills to serve you, for we are yours. Let your comfort strengthen us, your grace renew us, and your Spirit guide us, so that we may find our hearts transformed by your love. Amen.