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 5 Lent

### WILL WE HEAR?

Richard Hooker, 17<sup>th</sup> century Anglican Theologian of greatest note, said this about our coming to this place week after week: “Once places of public worship are provided, we go there for mutual correspondence –commerce, as it were – between God and ourselves. This is especially important because it is a lack of knowledge of God that causes all the wrongdoing among people just as it is the knowledge of God that is the sure ground of all our happiness and the seed of whatever perfect virtue might grow in us. This sort of knowledge, we may justly affirm, is the primary and most important thing that God imparts to His people. Our duty to receive this wisdom from His merciful hands is the first of those religious offices with which we publicly honor Him here on earth. To instruct all sorts of people on how to inherit eternal life, it is necessary that we openly teach the sacred and saving truths of God.

We call this open publication of heavenly mysteries by the name *preaching*. ... Preaching is not the same as teaching in that the objective is not only to teach the truth but also to proclaim the faith.”

We have a great responsibility to hear and do and today Jesus is ‘preaching’ for he is leading hearers to the ‘truth’ and also ‘proclaiming the faith’ as it will be proclaimed for now over 2000 years. The subject today is ‘authority.’

This parable, the Wicked Tenants, appears in all three Synoptic Gospels. It is a fascinating study in communication in a setting that has already proven to be full of obstacles to hearing. Jesus is speaking to the people and to the chief priests. Trying to be clear to groups with such diverse agendas is difficult at best. Jesus had been teaching the people when the scribes and Pharisees raise the question about Jesus’ authority. The authorities are not open to what Jesus is saying. Jesus turns to the people, knowing that the so-called ‘authorities’ will be over-hearers. The parable is not *to* them but it is *about* them, a point that will become apparent at the close of the parable. It is shocking to be listening in to another’s story and suddenly become aware that it is about you! Jesus teaches by double indirection, since a parable by its very nature is indirect communication. For the people the parable is a warning about position and power hungry leaders.

The parable is allegorical in nature since it reflects events that did occur. The vineyard was a familiar image of God’s heavy investment of time, work, care, and patience with the anticipation of fruitful return (Isaiah 5:1-7; Ezekiel 15:1-5; 19:10-14) The vineyard was in the hands of tenants a long time, perhaps referring to the period prior to John the Baptist. The servants (slaves) who came with God’s demand for a return on the investment are the ‘prophets’, including John the Baptist; and the beloved son is, of course, Jesus. The tenants are the religious leaders who not only forget they are God’s tenants but swell with the notion that they can actually take over as owners of the enterprise, especially when they take the son outside (Jerusalem, Heb. 13:12-13) and kill him. The word of final punishment on the tenants (leaders) stuns the people (v.16), for they sense that they too will fall with the nation as God gives it over to others.

The story that is unfolded in the parable brings to mind first the fall of Jerusalem and its subsequent control by the Roman military. The interpretation of the destruction of Jerusalem as God's punishment for the religious establishment's treatment of the prophets (Acts 7:52) and rejection of Jesus was apparently not uncommon among early Christians. Beyond the fall of the city, however, the parable anticipates the movement of the gospel from Jews to Gentiles. We must not understand the move to Gentiles as either arbitrary or complete. Throughout Luke-Acts, even with repeated stories of rejection in the synagogues, there continued to be followers of Jesus among the Jews. But the parable has meaning beyond both the destruction of Jerusalem and the giving over of the vineyard to others (Gentile Christians). If history carried no lesson, it is a question whether Luke would have recorded this allegorized parable. If in Luke's time, or ours, tenants of God's vineyard deceive themselves with grand thoughts of place and power, there are always others to whom God can give over the trust. In fact, one thinks of those places in the world that were once the missionary fields for Europe and America, places where now the church is a lively and strong, in painful contrast to the established and endowed but dead churches of the Western world.

In verses 17-18 Luke joins the quotations of Psalm 118:22 and an allusion to Isaiah 8:14-15, both of which point to the critical role of Jesus in the story of salvation history. Because Luke believes that the law, the prophets, and the psalms all speak of Christ (24:44), the promise/fulfillment pattern is frequent in both the Gospel and Acts. Jesus is the rejected but exalted stone that completes God's building, or as the early preachers put it, "*God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified*" (Acts 2:36). The stone image in verse 18 is quite different from that of verse 17, but in its own way it also affirms Jesus as the "*head of the corner.*" Jesus is the centerpiece of God's work, says Luke, and therefore how Jesus is treated determines one's life ultimately. It is the good Steward that God seeks; it is one who understands God's share as a favorable pattern of behavior, one who gives gladly and in appropriate amounts of time, talent and treasure. This and this alone in life reflect how one treats Jesus. This determination may be present (v.18a) or future (v.18b), but certain and final in either case. This view of Jesus as the critical factor in the lives of people is not new here; Luke had stated it in the words of Simeon when the infant Jesus was presented at the temple: "Behold, this child is set for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is spoken against . . . , that thoughts out of many hearts may be revealed" (2:34-35).

How deeply should you honor the 'authority' of God? Read Paul in Philippians again over and over this week. God has given to you and to me the care of His Vineyard. We live in a small piece of that Vineyard but within this small piece we are to care fervently for his children here and we are to give and give and give some more in honor of His loving 'authority'. If we do not, God will find those who will as He states plainly in our hearing today in Luke's Gospel.

Paul said in an earlier writing that Jesus was the 'stumbling block in the whole world's way; Christ Jesus, as Paul said is a stumbling block to the Jews, and foolishness to the Greeks. It is that 'authority' thing isn't it! Today he tells us in Philippians that Christ is everything in his world. "*For his sake [Jesus Christ] I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes*

*through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith.*” Are we, as God asks, and as Paul states, willing to turn our life over completely to God? Jesus does and that will be played out before us over the coming two weeks. Sweating ‘as drops of blood’ indicates the depth of His giving for us. Yes, Jesus was against the authorities of His day because God was secondary. And today He is against the world as well. He stands in judgment against everyone who will not accept his acceptance of the world by faith alone; but he brings down his gavel only on the folly that will not see that *he judges nothing else* --- not goodness, not badness, not anything. As we point our fingers in judgment against any and everything with which we disagree or do not understand Jesus’ “againstness” is such a blessed resistance of the world’s insistence on judgment by works that you’d think it would make us all laugh out loud. All of those congregations who lie in rubble today because of their shallowness and pain and quick-triggered willingness to point fingers and judge the ‘other’ are misunderstanding God’s depth of love. The self-justifying world (including an alarmingly large number of Christians who think that being well behaved is more important to God than just trusting his forgiveness) can see it --- and him --- only as a threat. These are no different than the ‘vineyard keepers’ we read of this morning. Fear rules. The Gospel of grace, if we be truthful, this ‘absolutely free salvation’ does not get to the truly deep place of our heart does it. As long as the preacher does not hit ones particular ‘hot button’ he/she is safe but get to close with this easy going and charming concept of salvation and one is liable to get nailed to something just like Jesus. Be truthful! You do not want grace...what you want is law. Like those less than bright tenants in the parable, we try to stop the coming of the paradoxical Power that alone can keep us in business, thinking we know or have something, when in fact if we do not hear Jesus and dig deeply to comprehend God’s ‘authority’ of love we will have no business.

You came here to hear the truth. Preaching is not always pretty and neat and tidy. And it gets more serious in the days ahead. For you see, what we have learned and not fully comprehended is that no one stops God’s Power. Jesus dies for the sins of those who killed him --- even for the sins of unbelief by which we kill him over and over again. We are like the hamster in the wheel, running around and around, for the real truth is ‘we cannot mess up what God has put in place for us. All He ever wanted / want is for us to believe.

So come on up to His altar and leave the weight of the world and in Paul’s words “press on to what lies ahead...that goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Jesus Christ.” It is our only and greatest hope. Amen.