

PRAISE INTERNATIONAL
JUST IMAGINE?
MATTHEW 21:33-44

Good Morning

Prayer Needs – Loiuise, Preston, Ann

Read Text

When I was a college student in Santa Barbara in the late 1970s, a local theater periodically offered up an odd double-feature: My Fair Lady (1964) and Brother Sun, Sister Moon (1972).

The two-for-the-price of one show was, not unexpectedly, popular with students. For less than \$10, you could have a great date (including Cokes and popcorn). Nearly everyone I knew had gone at least once — I think I saw the twin bill three times!

Among my friends, it became kind of a sport to try and figure out what point the theater owners were trying to make with this weird twofer. We came up with all sorts of geeky philosophical and theological analyses in the process. “It is quite the contrast,” pronounced a religion major, “a rags-to-riches tale and a riches-to-rags story.” Not a bad summary — and one that has stayed with me ever since. Both were stories about money, social status, and the search for identity and meaning in the world.

Whatever happened to Eliza Doolittle, the heroine who was lifted from a life of poverty to a genteel upper-class existence, after the final line of My Fair Lady when Henry Higgins orders her to fetch his slippers, we don't know. Truth is, I adored My Fair Lady but its ambiguous ending always worried me. The moral of the tale? Misogyny will always be with you?

The Francis film, about a wealthy young man who, 800 years ago, abandoned riches to pursue “holy poverty,” ends with far more clarity, with one reviewer saying of it: “The movie’s humane take on brotherly love, so generous that it even forgives the Catholic Church, ends with the meeting of Pope Innocent III (Alec Guinness) and Francesco (Graham Faulkner), wherein the Pope blesses Francesco and supplicates himself before him.” The final image is of Francis, with bare feet, walking down a hill toward an open field, singing his canticle Brother Sun, Sister Moon. At 19, I sat in the theater and wept. No ambiguity there. The film drew me into a vision — an experience, really — of the interconnected world and St. Francis’ passionate obsessions: poverty, humility, and creaturely care. It has spiritually haunted me ever since.

- Could it be that we still live in a world that lives by the wrong definitions of worth and value?
- Could it be that we still hear the and see definitions of worth and value by power, privilege and success?
- Could it be that the only thing that can heal a broken life and a broken world is not found in systems of power or privilege?

In our text this week Jesus is replying to a question - **by what Authority do you do these things?** First He tells the story of the two sons that we looked at last week but then He tells another Parable - that in the end - is a reversal of the accepted understanding of both God and His Kingdom.

Into a world defining Authority by systems of privilege and power, Jesus reveals that His authority is about restoring wholeness to a broken world - a place where the promise and provision of the landowner is seen, experienced and known - and that is good news.

And the secret is simply this Christ in you!
Yes, Christ in you bringing with Him the hope of all the glorious things to come.
Col 1:27b JB Phillips

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To be clear the obvious meaning of the parable is this:

- God is the landowner, the servants are the prophets, the son Jesus Christ and the tenants - the Jewish people - true but it also miss's the point.
- To leave this as the conclusion of the text is to miss the context of why Jesus gave the parable - answering the question **by what authority do you do these things**.
- It's also potentially problematic especially in a time when we seen people naming themselves as Christians while being anti-semitic using this simplistic interpretation. Not good.
- So lets look at this text both from these contexts - Jesus is answering the question - by what authority do you do these things and He is speaking in the context of Roman-occupied Palestine.

The parable begins in Roman-occupied Palestine.

- A landowner established a vineyard complete with a fence, a winepress, and even a watchtower. He takes a barren non fruitful piece of land and by His own resource supplies all that is needed for it to become what it could not become on its own - a fruitful vineyard - the landowner has the **creativity** to use his resources to change land that was barren into something productive. Then knowing it has all that it needs he returns to his own country as often happened in the Roman Empire.
- Tenants were in charge of overseeing the productivity of vineyard that essentially cost them nothing and paying the owner when a harvest finally came (which could take up to three years), in the form of a share of the produce. **The purpose of his creativity is not to accumulate wealth but bring provision to others** - specifically by means of **partnership**. Even though he has an abundance of resource's he is **generous and willing to share them with others** - specifically with those who do NOT have resources - he is **compassionate**.

So far we have notice that the landowner is not just heartless ruler of commerce he is **creative, generous, compassionate even trusting**.

- Yet something happens after time - the tenants have now taken '**ownership**' of the vineyard in their heart, no they never held the deed.
- But they have **forgotten, dismissed and essentially eliminated** the landowner in their heart - in their heart and mind the land belongs not him but to them.
- So when the owner's slaves arrived to collect his share of the produce, the tenants attacked them, even beating one and killing another.

It's here that we learn something again about the landowner who sent another delegation of slaves to collect the rent. Hmm... **this is not normal!**

- **You mean he is not coming to vindicate the wrong committed against him?**
- This landowner is not first looking for vindication his generosity is almost beyond our imagination - patiently inviting the tenants to partnership.
- Yet those slaves were treated even worse than the first. Surely by now the owner would send in troops or some form of **Vindication!**
- But no, instead he sends his son, thinking by some logic that the thugs who have abused two delegations of slaves will respect the owner's son and heir. How foolish! Now the tenants reason that if they kill the son, **they will get his inheritance**.

The tenants are living from the desires that have laid hold of their heart they as embrace violence as the solution and kill the son.

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The landowner never parts from the desire of his heart to bring share his provision in partnership with the tenants.

- **Vindication** never even enters into the story for the landowner because it is NOT who He is!

Jesus asks, “Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?” The answer is obvious at least to those hearing 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”** (verse 41)

- Finally something sounds ‘**normal**’?

Yet there isn’t a lot about this parable that is ‘normal’ in fact Jesus reply to this ‘sure’ reply is to reveal that **the story was never about the ‘vineyard’!**

- It is first about the **heart of a generous, compassionate and merciful landowner** and then its about the dramatic shift to see what God is actively building and revealing His Kingdom upon the earth and that will require a change of heart.
- A place where Heaven encounters the earth.
- So what have learned about Authority from the characters and locations of Jesus parable?

The landowner is God - who is shared His provision in hopes of partnership through the Vineyard the house of Israel, Isaiah 5

*Let me sing now for my beloved, A song of my beloved about His vineyard. My beloved had a vineyard on a fertile hill. He dug it all around, cleared it of stones, And planted it with the choicest vine. And He built a tower in the middle of it, And also carved out a wine vat in it; ...What more was there to do for My vineyard **that I have not done in it?***

The Vineyard was never intended to be a place of exclusion - a club you had to pay dues to enter or be a part of...yet it had become just that.

- It was supposed to be a place of Provision and Partnership.
- What we learn about the landowner - God is that He takes of what is His in generosity, compassion, with a goal of reconciliation to share it.
- When He experiences broken trust and betrayal the goal of this landowner is **NOT vindication but reconciliation - the goal is wholeness.**
- **He is always calling His children back to life!**

What we learn about the tenants is how easy it is to take the invitation to partnership and make it about privilege and power - entitlement.

- To the point that they forget that the vineyard was never theirs - its like they forget the who purpose of the vineyard.
- That says so much about the broken systems of our day that we could spend a lot of time talking about.
- When we lean into power and privilege it **ALWAYS leads to blindness of truth!** ALWAYS!

That will preach - beloved. Notice that even while Jesus is telling a story that is essentially exposing the motives of His listeners that they are so blinded by their commitment to power and privilege that what comes out of them when Jesus asks the question about the tenants - what comes out is what is IN them - **vindication - eye for eye.**

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Jesus is telling the story plainly of a God who is filled with mercy and what comes out is a demand for violence and death! Beloved when we surrender our hearts to anything other than the the love of God revealed in mercy and grace – our demand for power ends in blindness.

Jesus is revealing in this parable a God who does not define Freedom and wholeness as a Zero sum game - ***I win when you loose.***

- He reveals freedom and life – which was always His goal, is something that is given and shared freely at His expense for our benefit!
- This is why He responds to their conclusion with the conclusion - **it was never about the vineyard!**
- You are missing the real structure - the new structure the Kingdom of God - where Mercy and Grace are revealing wholeness.
- Where the Kingdom is not a reward for your work but a free gift given.
- My House will be a House of Prayer - Friendship for all nations but you have turned into something else!

Interesting isn't it that we can say yes I see the obvious applications but oh if we leave it in the first century we miss the continued invitation to surrender to the nature and quality of Gods actual reign in our life. Said another way *we can stand behind this text and wave our fingers at Jesus listeners or dare we say the 'others' of our lives?*

- Can listen to Jesus words and allow them to confront the constructs of our imagination - can we surrender to a reversal of real authority in our life from systems of influence and power to mercy, and grace?
- Can we imagine a God so creative, so patient as the landowner in the parable?
- A God who has made us stewards of a lovely and bountiful vineyard ***who asks us to be as generous with others as He has been to us?***
- Can we imagine a God whose mercy and grace extend to beyond our fixing or repairing our world but something beyond our dreams?

October 4 was St Francis day on the church calendar. Francis was born to a merchant family in the Italian city of Assisi. As a young man, he was attracted to adventure and moved by romantic tales of knights. When he himself became a knight, Francis met a leper while riding through the countryside. Overwhelmed by a divine impulse, Francis dismounted his horse, shared his coat with the leper, and kissed the man's diseased face. Captivated by the experience, Francis **began to re-imagine his life** in light of the gospel, renouncing his selfish desires and his father's wealth. A beggar for Christ's sake, Francis inspired thousands to walk away from worldly success and join his movement of friars who sought to renew the church in their day.

While praying before a crucifix in the dilapidated chapel of San Damiano, Francis of Assisi heard a voice speak to him: "Francis, repair my church, which has fallen into disrepair, as you can see."

Repair by means of surrendering to the heart of the Landowner - the chief cornerstone partnering not in the abundance of his earthly possessions but rather in the abundance of the landowner – a life reimagined.

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Closing Prayer

Holy God,
you love justice and hate oppression;
you call us to righteousness and not to exploitation.
Give us generous and loving hearts,
and eyes to see the splendor of your reign,
that we may live in truth and honor,
and praise you for the transformation of our lives,
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

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