

The Original Guide to Being Fruitful

We have two scripture readings this morning which have been frequently connected based more on negative connotations than on positive or hopeful ones. For some reason, despite the darkness of the parable, especially in the more traditional interpretations, two commentaries which I read from several years ago caught my attention this year in a way that they haven't previously...both of them lifted up something that Jesus mentions twice in the parable but is usually ignored in the traditional interpretations. The timing of this parable is set at the time of harvest and Jesus' concern seems to be about the produce which is being harvested. The parable is directed at those chief priests and elders who have questioned his authority in that moment in time when it is spoken, but for us in our time, where do we understand our place or role in such an allegory from so long ago? Thinking about that and about exactly what the content is of our first passage today and how we often think of it in negative terms as well seems to point to something we need to consider. The Exodus 20 passage which is the first presentation of God's guidance for those people that are being led from slavery toward a Promised Land of milk and honey; that land which God is going to give them, is often viewed more negatively as restrictions on that freedom than as a gift of guidance leading to an healthy and abundant way of living together in community. These "ten words" as they are called in the Hebrew are not simply a list of rules given to whip into shape a stiff-necked people; instead, they are better seen as a means given to them by a God who desires to form and nurture an alternative community which lives together in harmony bound together by loyalty to the One who has redeemed them from a life of bondage. Additionally, they are being given ways where there are common goals which create a space for human beings to live fruitful, productive, and meaningful lives before God and with one another where the goals are not wealth or prestige. These words begin with YHWH declaring I am your God, and they end with "your neighbor" thus encompassing the radical idea of commitment to God and compassion for neighbor. These "Ten Words" were meant to be guides to these people having lives both meaningful and fruitful with the Sabbath commandment at the center with its insistence on rest and restoration for every person, animal and field. These commandments were a strong counter balance to all that these people had experienced in Egypt...and were to be the new pattern for establishing the community that God desired them to be. However, as we know all too well, that guidance has not been all that effective. For some of us it has led to creating a sense of a false dichotomy which seems to create a conflict between Law and Grace, forgetting both are gifts from our Lord. The law is a gift give for guidance, grace is the gift for forgiveness when we fall short in our efforts to live within those boundaries. When we come to this second parable that Jesus directs to those chief priest and elders in the temple courtyard, he is talking to those very well versed in the legal aspects of the law but are blinded to the compassionate love underlying them and the proclamation which Jesus is bringing. As the parable is told, God is the landowner

who has planted a vineyard, humanity with whom there is a covenant. There are tenants who are in charge of the people of the covenant and after a while when it is harvest time, the landowner sends slaves to collect the produce. But the tenants, seize the slaves, beat one, kill another and stone yet another. This happens again, with the same results. In this parable, the tenants are the chief priest, elders and other leaders of the people; while the slaves who are mistreated are the prophets who are sent to warn and call for repentance. In the last section of the parable, the landowner sends his son, saying they will respect my son; only to have the son also killed by the tenants. Jesus then asks them, "Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?" His audience has now has the table thoroughly turned on them, give this answer: "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." Jesus then tells 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'? Therefore 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." The passage ends with the chief priests and Pharisees who have heard these last two parables seeing themselves in them wanting to arrest Jesus but being afraid of the consequences at that moment. It is obvious that the son in the parable is Jesus and does refer to what will happen as the religious leaders find a way to arrest and kill him, just as Jesus does indeed become the cornerstone for achieving God's will. However, elements of this parable have been used in unfortunate ways...while the chief priests and Pharisees of the temple were replaced; God did not take away the covenant promise made to the descendents of Abraham. God's promises...all of them are kept eternally. When we look at the parables of Jesus we know that they are allegories, so we look to see who or what the various characters represent. As we walked through this parable, did you notice that it did not seem as if we had a role or place? It has been argued that we could be considered tenants and that we can choose to ones who tend God's vineyard well. But that seems to be rather a stretch. What precipitates the actions within this parable is the desire of the landowner to harvest the produce of his vineyard. The resolution suggested is to put tenant in charge who will give the landowner his produce at harvest time. And Jesus' final word is that the kingdom of God will be given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom. Perhaps that is where we are in this parable...perhaps we are the produce of the vineyard...we have been tended by our Lord and are meant to be the people that produces the fruits of the kingdom...we are to be a gathered community that lives following the original guidance on how to live fruitful lives first given to people at Mount Sinai and further proclaimed by the heir who became the cornerstone. I found a poem¹ written six years ago for this same Sunday in the Lectionary which set the tone for this sermon and is printed in the bulletin. (Read Poem) In the Name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

¹ Poem For The Sunday Lectionary (Pentecost +17) by Andrew King copyright 2017