

Sermons at Christ Church

Bound To Christ in Love and Hope.

Pentecost 19

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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. Jesus said. The parable in today's gospel story makes you want to scratch your head. It sounds so unreal. How is that even possible? The parable is a kind of story that leaves you in disgust. You wonder to yourself, why do people do that? Your wondering about the behavior of others isn't because you think you are righteous or perfect, but it is because you know you cannot do anything close to that.

It is because your expectation of yourself is such that as sinful as you think you may be, you know that what the tenants did wasn't right, as broken as you may be, you give yourself the room to right wrongs, to be better each day. Sometimes, when we measure people's actions against ours, we are simply reminding ourselves of the expectations that we have of ourselves and because of our life of faith, the duty we owe to have a high expectation of ourselves.

The truth is that it takes a liberated man and woman to see themselves as being tenants in God's vineyard and expect to pay rent.

The parable in today's gospel story is a continuation of Jesus' takedown of the Chief Priests and the elders who had failed to live up to the expectation of God. In the parable, Jesus tells a story of a landowner who planted a vineyard and leased it to tenants.

The landowner's expectation, like anyone who has ever invested in a business, is that at some point in the future, they will receive some dividends for their investment. This is as simple as they come. There is nothing complicated about this arrangement.

But here is where the story gets a little more interesting. The tenants didn't meet the expectations of the landowner. In fact, they used violence as a means to facilitate their desire to dishonor whatever agreement they had with the landowner.

Quite recently, someone shared with me that they invested in a real estate business with someone they considered a friend. Like any investor, he expected that the business would yield returns. The plan worked until his business partner refused to answer his calls or respond to his emails.

And whenever he responded to emails or calls, it was one made-up story after another. The experience has shaken him to the core because he trusted his friend. Now, he hasn't only lost his investments, he has also lost a friend.

When I first heard the story and reflected more about it, I had to go back to the very day that the business owner made the pitch to his friend, inviting his friend to invest in the business. The investor's belief in the business plan and the expected returns he was to receive from his investments isn't different from the sentiments expressed by the prophet Isaiah when he said *"Let me sing for my beloved my love-song concerning his vineyard. My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. He dug it and cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines; he built a watchtower in the midst of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it; he expected it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes"*

The point worth noting is the gap between expectation and reality.

Sometimes the gap gets so wide that you wonder why we should have any expectations at all. Someone once said that to have expectations is to open yourself up to being disappointed and for that reason he has no expectations. We can tell from the words of the prophet Isaiah that the beloved who expected grapes but got wild grapes was disappointed. We can tell that the owner of the vineyard whose slaves and son were murdered was also disappointed. My friend who invested in his friend's business is also disappointed.

Back when I was in primary school, one of the comments you would typically see on a report card was "There is room for improvement." The statement did not dismiss whatever effort a student has put into their work. It acknowledges that the student isn't where she or he needs to be, but there is room for that student to grow.

That statement considered the possibilities that lie ahead of a student. That should the student work hard enough or, like Paul, strive towards what lies ahead, the student will exceed expectations- a crown awaits that student.

In a way, the parable reflects some of our approach to stewardship and accountability. We have been given so much, least of which is our lives. It may not be perfect because of losses, illness, trials,

tribulations and a whole lot. But as imperfect as our lives may be, as challenging as our lives maybe we still have life, and the fact that we have life should make us grateful.

For me, the idea of being grateful is what leads to the joy of feeling and being accountable. You value the principle of being accountable, not because it is the right thing to do but it is the highest point of your worship.

And so, this morning, the question is, what expectations do we have for ourselves? We may not be where we need to be, but do we have room to grow and how do we grow? To grow, is to be enlightened.

The Sufis-mystic Muslims, have a unique approach to enlightenment. They believe that the way to enlightenment is to die before you die. In other words, there are two types of death. The first death for the Sufi is considered to be detachment from everything material and physical. For the Sufi, dying before you die is to be fully alive, fully engaged, and fully in love in the present and separated from anything material. For them, human joy isn't found in what you accumulate. It is found in what you give away.

Whereas the Sufis look at enlightenment through detachment, Thomas Merton in his book *The Seven Storey Mountain* looks at detachment as liberation. It is a liberation through purgation. Merton argues that letting go not only creates unity, but the cost involved in that decision shows the depth of grace which is at work in us. The fact is that what we give up is real, but what we receive is deeper coherence and peace. The kind of peace which surpasses human understanding and which none, but God alone can give.

What are our expectations of ourselves? I am tempted to believe that there is no divergence between the liberated man or woman's expectations of themselves and God's expectations of them.

Our tragic story is that for some of us, we don't live life as shrines of God's integrity, we don't see ourselves as workers in a vineyard who have been given a unique opportunity to tend the vineyard, manage the vineyard, protect the vineyard and make the vineyard as life-giving as possible. But with selfish greed, we deceive and kill in order to deny accountability and accumulate as much as we can.

A Sufi will tell you that we are already dead. We come to this world with nothing, and we leave with nothing so why attach yourself to stuff, why hold on to stuff, why take that which doesn't belong to you, why should greed lead you to the point of killing others?

A liberated man or woman understands that this is God's vineyard, and he or she is a tenant in God's vineyard, and as a tenant, there is an expectation that he or she has to meet, and that is to pay your rent. The liberated man or woman also understands that we cannot meet God's expectation by our own effort, we cannot pay this rent by our own effort, we have to rely on the same God who gave us the vineyard as tenants in order to pay our rent.

Paul had this divine intuition, that neither he or anyone else could meet God's expectations, and that was how he was liberated. And for that reason, he could abandon all the worldly goods and trappings of life for a lifegiving suffering of sharing the good news of Jesus Christ with the world.

St Paul believed ever deeply that that was his rent. He cannot pay for it; Christ has paid it. But he wasn't going to assume that he had no responsibility. He had some responsibility and paid whatever little that was required of him. To stay in the vineyard is free but it isn't free because God requires you to be a good steward, good requires that you be responsible for the vineyard.

There is a story of a Nigerian who called into a radio station in Atlanta and won a prize. The host of the program told him he had won a free trip to a resort in the Caribbean. Being a Nigerian, he asked the host this question "Is it free, free or free?" What do you mean is it free, free or free? Asked the host. "Free is when I have to pay a fee but free, free is when I don't have to pay anything."

A student once asked his teacher. Master, why do you keep something that is cracked? The master replied, remember, imperfections can sometimes create space for something beautiful. The fact of our life is that because of all our cracks, we may not always meet the expectations that are set for us. But can something beautiful come out of us? Absolutely. And that is what we should always aim for, a life of faithfulness which bears beautiful fruits of the kingdom of God.

Amen.