

Agents of God's Grace

Matthew 21: 33-44

Philippians 3:4-14

Rev. Dr. Dawn Jeffers Ramstad

Hudson United Methodist Church

8 October 2023



Right after we hear our scripture for the day read aloud in worship our church replies, “The word of God for the people of God, Thanks be to God.” But when we read a parable like this one from Matthew’s gospel, my first thought to “the word of God for the people of God is never “thanks.” Most often after hearing that parable read aloud my thought is almost always “Really?” This parable makes many preachers, myself included, want to duck and cover, change careers, look God in the eye and say, “You have got a lot of explaining to do!”

Jesus’ parable for today was a regular topic of conversation at this week’s continuing education gathering of United Methodist pastors and deacons. When we gathered on Wednesday, most of us were working on our sermons for the following Sunday. I sat with a young pastor I have known since he was a senior high youth. As we exchanged notes from our Tuesday Bible studies, he also noticed what I about this parable of Jesus; Jesus was not talking to his followers, he was talking to the Priests and Pharisees.

As a reminder, our major scripture map for our current sermon series is Paul’s letter to the church in Philippi, and we are pairing his letter with readings from Jesus’ last few days of teaching ministry before he was arrested and crucified. In today’s Gospel reading, Jesus stood in one of the Temple courts as one of many rabbis teaching while people gathered for Passover in Jerusalem. Priests and Pharisees, milled through the crowd listening to various rabbis as they taught. The religious leaders’ objective was to make certain these rabbis agreed with their teaching.

When I was a youth reading Matthew’s Gospel on my own for the first time, it looked to me as if Jesus had to know what was coming because we learned he was God’s son in preschool Sunday School. That is true, but I have since learned that Jesus also knew current events as he went to Jerusalem for Passover that year. He knew Jewish leaders were collaborating with their Roman occupiers in a desperate attempt

to protect their traditions. This is not necessarily a bad thing; traditions help our faith grow like a parents' bending to hold their child's hands helps a baby become a toddler. The problem with their tradition keeping was that the priests and Pharisees forgot their purpose was to help the people know God, rather than to keep them safe from an occupying enemy. By adhering so strongly to their traditions in the face of great adversity because of the Roman occupation the priests and Pharisees forgot what they still owed God as agents of God's grace. They wanted to keep back their tithe to use for their own perceived need when Rome was their immediate threat.

As twenty-first century Christians we understand Jesus best today with the standard interpretation for most of his parables. God is the landowner who planted the vineyard and built the wine press. The vineyard is the nation of Israel, at least that is what the priests, Pharisees, and Jesus' followers understood the day they heard Jesus tell this parable. They also understood that the priests and Pharisees were the tenant farmers who did not want to give the landowner his share of the bounty, 10% under the laws of Moses. In his parable Jesus inferred that the priests and Pharisees did not want to be satisfied with their 90% of the bounty. They wanted to control all of it.

Matthew had two reasons for telling us this parable. First, it is our history. We need a basic understanding of how Jesus could be such a threat to his religious leaders that they would cooperate with Herod to crucify him. Second, by telling it here as the conflict in Jerusalem between the Jewish leaders and their Roman occupiers grew as the Coliseum foundations were being laid in Rome, Matthew shared this parable as a cautionary tale for the Church. We too run the risk of putting our traditions above our responsibilities as agents of grace.

Matthew, Luke, and John were inspired to write their gospels before all the eyewitnesses to Jesus teaching and healing were dead and gone. One of the most helpful details to know as we to read and apply those three Gospels is that their length was determined by the maximum size a book could be in their time. All three wrote to maximum the space available they made space-based choices, a practice academic writers still use now.

From college freshman to doctoral student, a common essay assignment is "two to four pages in 12-point font with standard margins." Freshman engineering students I once tutored taught me how to meet any page count with a font trick word processors made possible. They often used 12-point *Courier* just to barely make their minimum 2 pages. In seminary I preferred to squish my 5-page essay into four pages by choosing 12-point **Ariel Narrow**.ⁱ

Rather than play font games, good writers use focus and editing to connect with their readers within a set page count. Our four gospel writers did this, and included various details in their work based on their known audience. No other writer included this parable, but Matthew wrote to primarily to Christians with a Jewish heritage. This is why I believe Matthew not only wrote to our need for historical understanding; he also knew that very much like Pharisees we Christians can be drawn to choose preserving our tradition over our call to be agents of God's grace.

Anyone devoted to life time Bible reading could wonder if Paul either heard this parable while he was still a Pharisee, or if he if he may have read it in a draft of Matthew's gospel as he was imprisoned and waiting trial during Nero's persecution of Christians across the Roman empire. Scholars often suspect a secret agent of the empire embedded in the early church was an unrecorded detail Paul's arrest in Jerusalem. (Acts 21: 27-37) By including today's parable, Matthew could have the dual purpose of recording our history and giving a warning about such a double agent. Evil often arrives disguised as something good, a wolf in sheep's clothing that appears to be faithful while being a double agent who is not loyal to God.

Paul explained to the Philippians the difference between being an agent of tradition versus being an agent of grace. He included his resume as a Pharisee as he wrote to the Philippians, our reading for today. Rev. Dr. Sharon H. Ringeⁱⁱ pointed out that Paul's resume is parallel to the hymn about Christ that he quoted in Philippians 2: 6-11ⁱⁱⁱ. Christ's humility was the source of both his grace and ours. Paul's resume was largely made out the traditions he inherited as a coincidence of his birth. These were great privileges. Paul had even used them to advance Christian thinking about grace in his missionary journeys. But still he said, "The very credentials (I waved) around as something special, I'm tearing up and throwing out with the trash—along with everything else I used to take credit for. And why? Because of Christ. . . . I gave up all that inferior stuff so I could know Christ personally, experience his resurrection power, be a partner in his suffering, and go all the way with him to death itself. If there was any way to get in on the resurrection from the dead, I wanted to do it." (Philippians 4: 7-11, The Message)

When Paul encountered Christ, he went from being an agent of religious tradition to being an agent of God's grace. We Boomers who grew up during the Cold War watched *The Adventures of Rocky and Bullwinkle* and carry with us a particular cartoon idea of secret agents: Boris and Natasha. At the risk of being called a heretic, I suspect that when Paul was in any city—from Jerusalem to Philippi to Rome where he was tried—as an agent of God's grace, Paul was about as subtle as Boris and

Natash in Frostbite Falls. I believe it was easy for his enemies to have Paul arrested because he was bold in his mission to proclaim God's grace rather than to protect his tradition when it was threatened by Rome's traditions.

Friends, Matthew may be subtle about it, but Paul is not. As Christians our mission is to be an agent of God's grace in every situation. Not because we are perfect. Not because we have it made. Not because of how we saw God present in our past. We press on as agents of God's grace because we've "got (our) eyes on the goal, where God is beckoning us onward—to Jesus. (We're) off and running, and (we) are not turning back." (adapted from Philippians 3: 12-14, The Message.)

Agents of grace, may we too be as subtle as Paul in embracing our mission.

Amen.

ⁱ For good readability my weekly sermons are between 1800 and 2000 words in 14-point Garamond. This prints as four pages on both sides of two sheets of paper. If you do need a larger font, please ask Kathy to print your copy in 16 or 18 points.

ⁱⁱ Professor Emerita, Wesley Theological Seminary, Washington, D.C., working preacher.org. accessed on 2023.10.03.

ⁱⁱⁱ "Though he was in the form of God, he did not consider being equal with God something to exploit./ But he emptied himself by taking the form of a slave and by becoming like human beings./ When he found himself in the form of a human,/ he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross./ Therefore, God highly honored him and gave him a name above all names,/ so that at the name of Jesus everyone in heaven, on earth, and under the earth might bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Philippians 2: 8-11, Common English Bible.)