

The High Cost of Business

Matthew 21: 33-46

World Communion Sunday
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By

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To the extent possible, effort has been made to preserve the quality of the spoken word in this written adaptation.

This summer we had our grandson, Avery, spent the night with Grandma and Grandpa at their place. He's five years old. It was the first time he spent a night away from his immediate family and he was afraid that he might miss them. So we planned a number of things to do with Avery to take his mind off of missing his mom, and dad, and sister, and brother. His favorite movie is *The Wizard of Oz*. In fact, last Halloween, the family went trick or treating dressed as the characters in the story. That evening we streamed the movie with Judy Garland and watched together.

I'm sure most of you remember the story of the Wizard of Oz? Well, that was the movie title. The book was entitled, "The Wonderful Wizard of Oz." It too was an allegory like this parable in Matthew this morning. Frank Baum wrote the book in 1900. Like the parable in our text today – these allegories are meant to allow, and even force, us to see a different reality.

The Wizard of Oz is a wonderful and enjoyable story with a great deal of wisdom, but if one understands the symbolism, it is a howling, and political satire, historically rooted on the American scene. The work was written about the time of the collapse of the Populist party. It was the result of an alliance of Midwestern farmers and industrial workers that challenged bankers and economic interests, and wanted a silver standard to replace the gold standard. The scarecrow represents the Midwestern farmers, the tin man the industrial workers, the cowardly lion, who can roar but little else, represents reformers like William Jennings Bryan (the orator who failed in his presidential campaign), and Dorothy represents the common person. They all travel along the yellow brick road (the gold standard) to Oz (the abbreviation for ounce) to seek favors from the wizard (the President), who is just a common man who has power by deception. It is a biting political satire on life at the turn of the twentieth century, but it has a life well beyond the context of its origination.

The parable today is also a biting satire on life at the time of Christ and the ways in which the religious officials of the day misunderstood their role and mistreated the representatives sent

by God to correct their misappropriation of what belongs to God. So, what can we learn from this parable today?

It begins with rejection. How many of us have experienced rejection? It might have been in school as a child in the lunchroom or some heartbreaking rejection by someone you were dating. It might have been from an employer for a job you really wanted, or a promotion you thought you deserved. Actor Laurence Olivier once spoke about the pain of rejection. He said, "I have always thought that the initial trouble between me and my father was that he couldn't see the slightest purpose in my existence." I bet someone watching right now can relate to that. Matthew tells of a time when Jesus felt rejected. He quoted Psalm 118, "The stone that the builders rejected, has become the chief cornerstone: this is the Lord's doing and it is marvelous in our eyes." He applied that to himself. People began to dismiss his preaching. They weren't being fed by his sermons. They lost interest in his message. They labeled him a blasphemer.

Some of us can identify with the rejection Jesus felt. Someone you love rejected you, or you felt rejected at work or school. Some of us bear scars that no one else can see, scars of disappointment and pain. And surprisingly, on another level, people who have happy marriages and good families, still feel rejected. They don't even know why they feel that way. After all, no one they love has turned their back on them. But still, unspoken feelings of rejection haunt them. It seems to go way back.

It appears that the way we cope with rejection, either as young people or older adults, is determined by whether we already feel rejected or accepted. I know some young people can get left out of a group and it barely phases them. Why? Because they already feel loved and accepted within themselves. They aren't dependent on getting affirmed by their peers. At the same time, I know adults who go all to pieces when they feel rejected. A spouse leaves and the ordeal can become so crushing that they never move beyond the pain – feeling left behind. Others pick up the pieces and get on with their lives. What's the difference? Usually the latter group have an inner sense of acceptance and they don't depend upon a particular relationship to define their worth. They feel loved. And I think this sense of acceptance happens to us in the first few years of our lives. Some of us had parents who knew how to love without restraint and

that instilled a sense of security and acceptance in us. Others of us had well-meaning parents who did not, or could not, give unrestrained love. Maybe because they never experienced such love themselves. So many of us go through life looking for the acceptance we never received as children. And that's a crippling experience.

Towards the end of his life, Jesus entered Jerusalem and began telling stories. Have you ever listened to Garrison Keillor's radio show? *A Prairie Home Companion* was a big hit for over 40 years. We used to listen on Saturday afternoons. When he would say, "It's been a quiet week in Lake Woebegone," my ears would perk up and I would listen intently. Describing the loves of ordinary people, people I've never met, he had a way of making me care about them. Part of it was his voice. But he had a way of speaking to my ear. When he told of the petty quarrels and fears, it made me recognize my own. When he spoke of yearning for larger lives, my own longing flared up. He's telling a story, but he was telling *my* story at the same time. He didn't use theological words but the holiness of common everyday life on earth became real and tangible.

Jesus talked a lot like that. As people listened to his stories, they felt as if they were on stage. He was telling their stories and it had a way of highlighting the holiness of life on earth. As Jesus tells this story, the people knew at once it was not a new story. It is found in Isaiah, the prophet. They knew Isaiah's song probably by heart. The picture of a wonderful vineyard on a fertile hill that belongs to God. God dug it, cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines. Did they remember the rest of the tune? God looked for good grapes . . . but got wild grapes instead. Did they remember God's plaintive cry in Isaiah's song? Usually stories about vineyards in the Bible have to do with accountability. They talk about a day of reckoning.

In this story, we identify initially with the renters. The landlord is probably "privileged" and wealthy, living somewhere in leisure and luxury. And the renters are good, simple, hard-working people like you and me. Many of us like to be on the side of the little guy, because that's how we tend to think of ourselves. But that sets us up for the first jolt of the story. When the owner's servant appears asking for rent, the renters beat him up badly and send him packing. The renters break the contract and by abusing the servant, they abuse the master. So, what does the owner

do? Not only his income but now his honor is at stake. If he allows this to go unchallenged, who else is going to pay rent in Galilee? What will he do? He sends another servant. At this point the owner is looking like a fool. The first rejection ought to have called for some kind of maintenance of his honor. But he sent a second servant and they have beaten him too. So, what does the powerful owner do next? He sends his son to them. "Harold, you go down to my vineyard and see if you get along any better than the first two servants."

What kind of owner is this? It makes you wonder. The renters say, "Look, his heir. Let's kill him and the inheritance of the vineyard will be ours." And they kill him. Now the owner has no rent, no honor, no servants, and now, no son. And I'm not surprised by this act of violence of the tenants. I've come to expect it of them. They cared so little for the owner as to beat his servants, why wouldn't they beat his son as well? What is surprising is the tenant's assumption that, by killing the son, they'd get the vineyard. Why would they believe that? What claim do they have on the property? What would make them think that, by their own violent strategy, they could take the vineyard? This is starting to sound familiar isn't it? Maybe this story isn't as old as we first thought!

At any rate, this owner now has no rent, no honor, no servants, no son, and now no vineyard! The cruel and shameless have taken over. As I said at first, I sided with the renters against the owner but that was before I knew what sort of people they really were. Toward the end, after the beating of the servants and the death of his own son, I am disgusted with the owner and frustrated by his apparent inability to look after his own affairs. He's only got himself to blame. He should have put his foot down earlier. He should have stood up for himself and acted like an owner. But he didn't. He sent one servant after another to get stoned and beaten and rejected. Then he sent his son to get not only stoned and beaten and rejected, but killed. What kind of story is this? It's a tragedy, with servants rejected, the son dead, the vineyard's ownership in doubt, the owner's response in question. Now there are a bunch of tenants running wild in their stupidity and violence. And I get to thinking that life in this world hasn't really changed too much since the time of Isaiah and Jesus. Do any of us have a hard time being tenants? Do any of us still want to be owners?

The miracle seems to be that God keeps at it. God never gives up trying to reach me, touch me, change me. God's own son came into the vineyard gathering around himself the most unlikely people. More often than not they were people rejected by others and the larger society around them. They were looked down on even as people looked down on Jesus.

The owner of the vineyard looks weak and powerless. The tenants act like thieves and murderers. The story ends with the fate of the vineyard unresolved. Who will inherit? The owner is still alive but so too are the violent tenants. What will be the end of the story? The killings continue. Servants are still sent out to contest the inheritance of the violent and unjust. We don't know what the final fate will be.

But we do know this, according to the story and according to our own experience. The owner, the master, is unwilling to let the vineyard go. Great suffering has always been involved in the way this owner does business. And with the final act of the tenants killing the son, we know the high cost of doing business in this vineyard. And we know the master is willing to pay the price! Jesus says, "The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone, this was the Lord's doing, and it is amazing in our eyes." This is the Lord's doing. There's a cost to our relationship with God. And it's a high cost of doing business with us. For a holy and loving God to get close to people like you and me, there's a price to be paid.

Does sacrifice have any meaning today? Sometimes I think of the "sacrifices" that parents make for their children. Outside the family, the work that parents do on behalf of their children looks like a burden, a cost, a sacrifice. But from the parent's point of view, it's more like a gift. So, it might be better to speak of parent's sacrifice in terms of a gift. A parent is going to do something about unruly children. Love and pain go together. Jesus said, "This was the Lord's doing, and it is amazing in our eyes." The giving of his son. This is God's doing. There's hope for all of us who carry around feelings of rejection, inadequacy, and inferiority. The rejected stone becomes the cornerstone. In God's giving his son is the unrestrained gift and love of God. And I find that unrestrained gift and love when I lay my self-doubts and fears and rejection on the altar of God, and ask for healing of my wounded life.

Accountability! God desires the vineyard to produce the fruits of the kingdom of heaven. Fruits like love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, fidelity, tolerance and self-control. I'm accountable for my patch of the vineyard, my part of the garden. How aligned am I to the work God has given me to do? Given you to do? Whether it's preaching, or parenting, or accounting, caring for the poor, or leading a committee, helping children grow in faith, or protesting some violence loose in society— how am I doing with what God has given me?

Alexis de Tocqueville was a French historian and sociologist who traveled the United States in the 1830's seeking reasons for the great success of the new nation. He wrote about his observations in a book entitled *Democracy in America*,

I sought for the key to the greatness and genius of America in her harbors...; in her fertile fields and boundless forests; in her rich mines and vast world commerce; in her public school system and institutions of learning. I sought for it in her democratic Congress and in her matchless Constitution. Not until I went into the churches of America and heard her pulpits flame with righteousness did I understand the secret of her genius and power. America is great because America is good, and if America ever ceases to be good, America will cease to be great.

The Church has had a significant impact in the past. How are we doing now with what God has given us? This is World Communion Sunday. We get to join with people from all over the world at a banquet thrown in honor of Jesus Christ, the son whose sacrifice is really the greatest gift ever given. And people are discovering their wounded lives are being healed by the God who will not give up on the vineyard. And so, we take from the creation this bread and this wine, and giving thanks to the owner, we join in our own healing and the healing of the entire world. These are the gifts of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

