

St. Andrew's Episcopal Church  
The Reverend Barbara A. Hutchinson  
Proper 22 Year A Sermon

When I was a little girl and our family would head out on a vacation which involved a long car ride, my mother would come prepared with the entertainment bag which contained a stack of Nancy Drew Mysteries and a View Master, with a number of different reels, which would delight us endlessly for hours. I know I'm dating myself by mentioning using a View Master, this orange hand held device, into which you would insert a circular reel with these tiny little slides, which you would click through to see, with great anticipation, what the next slide would bring. To my surprise, Fischer Price still makes view masters, complete with 3-D reels where the stories of Star Wars, Hello Kitty and Spider Man are shown. I'm sure the reels we looked at also told stories, although I don't remember that, but I do recall having reels showing scenes from the national parks, and with each image we would hold our breath as we absorbed the beauty, before going onto the next slide.

I think looking at parables, as though through a view master is a really good idea – for within these sacred stories, there are many different images to explore, each one revealing some beauty or truth, each one offering us something different to ponder, each one an integral part of the larger story which we need to hear.

So this morning, I would like to invite us to view this parable as a series of slides, each one become increasingly challenging for us. For that is the purpose of parables. These are not stories intended to comfort us. They are the “afflicting the comfortable” stories of Jesus, meant to be disturbing. So if we find we look at only the slide which makes us feel righteous or just, we need to keep clicking deeper into the parable to find the truth meant for us this day.

Let's imagine we have put the reel into the view master of the parable of the wicked tenants. For the most comfortable interpretation, we may immediately move into allegory and understand God to be the landlord, the nation of Israel to be the wicked tenants who have distanced themselves from God and persecuted God's messengers, and the Gentiles or the newly formed Christian community as the new tenants, to whom God, the landlord, is now entrusting God's kingdom. John Chrysostom, the Archbishop of Constantinople in the late 4<sup>th</sup> century, who was known for his preaching, and whose name is translated as “golden mouthed”, certainly included this allegory in his exegesis, in his analysis of this text, and set the early church off in opposition to those, conveniently for us, unfaithful Jews. Current biblical scholarship refutes his analysis, based on what is now known of the Jewish culture of the first century and how they would have heard this parable in relationship to the coming of the Messiah, as well as through knowledge of a more accurate meaning of the words in their original language.

We move now from this comfortable slide, which doesn't especially challenge us, to slide #2, we look more deeply at the allegory.

Did you notice that if we follow the allegory, this means God is an absentee landlord. God is not there paying attention day by day to God's workers, God only shows up to reap the fruits. Is this the God we really believe in? One who is not supporting us, nurturing us, guiding us, and tending to us? If God is indeed seen as an absentee landlord, then maybe this parable is meant to be a critique of God, which would have been much at home in a Jewish setting, where laments and complaints against God served some strong theological purposes. But what happens if we move this parable from the setting in 1<sup>st</sup> century Judaism and put it into our own lives. For some of us it fits, for how many times, when something bad has happened in our lives, do we move God into this distant absentee landlord position, blaming God, cursing against God, and refusing to give back to God the fruits we've harvested ~ our time, talent, and money. I knew one young man in the parish I served last whose father died when he was a teenager and who grew to hate God for it, and never wanted to walk into a church again. It's often much easier to blame a God made distant from us by our own pain than to do the harder work of seeing God present in our suffering.

Slide #3 – What if the tenants are really the 1<sup>st</sup> century Jews? Rather than dismiss it as something “those” people did, what can we learn about ourselves? What does it call from us? Perhaps we learn that they, like us, have a pretty poor track record of remaining faithful and bringing to one another the fruits of God's kingdom: love, trust, mercy, and justice. Our record is spotty at best, shameful and horribly so at worst. This slide of the parable humbles us and opens for us the reality of humankind's brokenness and failure in living fully into our covenant with God. Suddenly this is no longer a story about someone else. It's a story about our own unfaithfulness.

It's getting harder, isn't it. But let's move onto slide #4?

Perhaps in this slide we see the image of a landlord, who when finding his slaves abused and killed, he sends more slaves, presumably to be abused and killed, then decides to send his son, with the surety, “They will respect my son”? And we struggle a bit with this. How foolish is that? And how awful is that that the Landlord sees his slaves as expendable in his own quest for power and honor. We may think we'd never be like that Landlord, but then we may notice that when one evaluates our own country's pattern of expending our resources of young people over and over again in war, when there appears to be no chance of recuperation, as perhaps as foolish. Sometimes it appears we keep at the quest for honor and power, as the landlord did, even when the cause is lost. It's a hard discipline when we look at ourselves as each person in the story, isn't it?

I have one more slide for us to look at. With one last click, we move to the most difficult one, at least for me as a church leader. What if the new tenants to whom

God has entrusted God's vineyard and mission is no longer the church? What if we let go of our arrogance of assuming God has chosen us and only us to bring in God's kingdom of restoration and salvation and the church has missed the mark? What if the church, or some denominations of the church, have killed the prophets of today, those pushing for justice, mercy, and kindness for all people? Could God set aside the church in favor of a different mission community? We could read in this parable the unsettling answer to that question: Absolutely. We have to look at that toughest of questions and wonder, "Are we still in the vineyard"?

Now I'm at point of real discomfort ~ how about you?

For those of you who have been keeping up on the misery at The General Theological Seminary this week, with stories in the NY Times and the Washington Post and multiple postings on facebook, one has to wonder, has this magnificent seminary, who formed me, and Betsy, and Mother Christine, and Father Ted, and Father Patrick, and most of the priests you probably know, has this seminary stepped out of the vineyard for the moment. Have they lost the sense of God's purpose, of being good stewards of those called to become leaders in the church? I would have wholeheartedly agreed with you, except for a recent letter sent by the Academic Dean to the President of the Board, opening a path for reconciliation. Even the best of us, even the institutions who believe they are focused and intentional around forming each other as Christians who follow Jesus' example of self sacrifice for the kingdom, can step out of the vineyard from time to time.

The only way I know whether or not we are still in the vineyard is by seeing what we freely and generously offer back to God and to our neighbor. The problem with the tenants was not that they weren't producing fruit. It was that they didn't want to give it back to the landlord who entrusted the vineyard to them.

Perhaps they had forgotten who actually owned the vineyard. We are fortunate Jesus left us a prayer, which continually reminds us: For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, now and forever.

God has entrusted God's kingdom to us, to care for, to be good stewards of, to generously and freely give it away to others, through our expression of God's love. What says to others that we are people of faith, that we are workers in the vineyard producing fruit and offering it back to God to build up God's kingdom, is us being a community whose heart is centered in our desire to know and to be like Christ to one another; Christ, the great lover of souls.

I think it all comes down to what is in our hearts, for each other and for God. And to know that it is not just our joy to give back to God all which God has given us, but it is our responsibility, as workers in the vineyard.

I read last week something that really has stuck with me. A theologian stated, he expected when he died and went to heaven, he would be asked one question: Had he

loved enough. This person imagined God wouldn't go through the whole long laundry list of his sins and ask him to explain, God would ask one question and only one question: Had he loved enough? In my mind, I expand that to include: had he forgiven often and again? Had he shown compassion to those around him, even when it didn't come naturally to his heart? Had he cared about the poor and hungry in his midst and acted on their behalf? Had he treated everyone with respect and dignity and worked toward justice? Had reconciliation always been his passion?

For if he had, then he had spent his time in the vineyard, offering God's love back to God's people. That's what salvation looks like.

It is our role to see it as our responsibility to bring the mission of God into each of our encounters, our relationships, our actions, and our thoughts. For then we embody the holiness, the grace, and the love of God, which we can set free to each other. This is what Jesus did for us. Jesus made God known in flesh. We make God known in flesh by what we embody, by what we incarnate. St. Francis of Assisi, whose feast day was yesterday, famously told his followers: preach the gospel at all times. If necessary, use words. The gospel is best preached by embodying it, by incarnating it. This is the question we must all ask ourselves – how do we embody God's holiness, for how we do matters. It is how we connect to God's greater mission and how we bring in the portion of God's kingdom God has entrusted to us.

Let's create one last slide in this story. Let's imagine us in the vineyard, with overflowing baskets of sun-kissed grapes, with our hearts wide-open, with the community of all people gathered, with songs of praise flowing from our lips, and with our arms stretched outward toward each other and to God in love. Let us live in this vineyard together. Amen.