

YOU GET THESE FREE OF CHARGE! A few snappy comments in the right situation.

1. In the pinball game of life, his flippers are a little further apart than most.
2. He was around when Alexander the Great was Alexander the Pretty Good.
3. I got the results of your intelligence test by mistake. There is no need for you to worry. It was negative.

Now if you can't figure out how or when to use them, the last one's for you. Your intelligence test was negative!

First, some background. Many interpreters suggest that this must be a parable of judgment, scissored as it is between 2 other accounts of judgment – the parable of the 2 sons and the parable of the king's wedding feast. But that's a simplistic rendering. Last weekend we dove into the story about the 2 sons and found it is about much more than judgment. And so this scenario of some tenants rebelling against innocent emissaries of their boss has layers of theological depth that rest well below the surface appearance of judgment. The one layer to which I'll give focus is one marked by the subject of OWNERSHIP. Simply put, the human tendency to behave less like guests in God's creation and more like management comes alive in this parable. From start to finish, we see confusion and conflict resulting from human beings who mistake what belongs to someone else for their own possession. This confusion over ownership constitutes the theological heartbeat of the parable.

Notice how the story opens. Verse 33 has 6 verbs in it alone, all attributed to activities of the owner. In those verbs – planted, put, dug, built, leased, went – we learn of the owner's absolute love for -- and absolute ownership of -- the property. His proprietary rights are total. What happens on that land happens entirely according to his dominion. But he exercises those rights and the dominion with utmost care and respect. He not only goes to great lengths to care for his vineyard. He also trusts the tenants to be responsible in his absence. When Matthew informs us that the owner 'went away,' these tenants attempt to steal or divert what has only been entrusted to them, not given to them. They rewrite the lease contract in their head to read with the kind of autonomy we're prone to read into our modern world: "It's my life to live. I make my own decisions. I'll make the choices I want."

The fact that the land is 'leased' to the tenants gives a clue to the source of the conflict that emerges. It's a conflict of ownership. These tenant farmers are employees, not independent contractors. They are part of a lease agreement. They may behave as if they own the farm, and work for themselves. But the truth of the matter is that they're accountable – and their accountability is to the owner.

Certain privileges and responsibilities go with being related to God and God's sovereignty. Trying to rewrite the terms of those privileges, or escape the responsibilities that accompany them, may engender a momentary feeling of freedom. But God remains the sovereign of everything we are and have, regardless of how we act. And not even coercion and cruelty can wrest from God what belongs to God and somehow make it our own.

But the parable needs another element to make sense – the astonishing mercy of God. The great lengths to which God goes for us – the Scriptures we often neglect, the prophets we put to death, the Son of God we so often ignore, His death on a cross we treat as nothing – all of these things should elicit our loyalty – not our rejection. God's incomprehensibly steadfast character and undying love ought to provoke gratitude, not grasping and sinful behavior. But when we confuse the ownership and loan issue, mistaking what has

been entrusted to us as in fact our own, there's no telling what we'll do to have our way. Even violence may enter the picture.

We hear this parable in a season of harvesting. And Jesus is interested in whether we are ready and willing to produce 'the fruits of the kingdom' through the way we are living our lives. And if we're willing to get the ownership matter straight, and comprehend how much of us God properly owns, we have a good chance of loving God and our neighbor as we ought. (adapted from Peter W. Mary, in THE LECTONARY COMMENTARY, The Third Readings: The Gospels, Ed. By Roger E. Van Harn, p. 123-125)

OK, so what's the message for us today? We need to remember who this is addressed to—the chief priests and elders. They lived by a very American concept – excluding. On every level of our being, we push things away. It seems the right thing to do. If we have thoughts that disturb us, we do our best not to think of them. If there are people who are undesirable, we make sure they are not welcomed into our homes, schools, clubs, and churches. We clear a space where we think we can breathe pure air.

Rigorous reasoning accompanies our hard work of exclusion. These reasons seem impeccable, acceptable to our friends. In fact, we think they are acceptable to all clear-thinking people because they are based on unalterable facts. We think they reflect 'the way the world is.' The inner and outer processes of excluding and reasoning make us feel safer, saner, more in charge, and more ourselves.

Zealous exclusions provide us with a well-defined identity. We not only know our boundaries, we guard them. We count ourselves among the elite, the chosen, the elect. Every time we see the mob, we recoil into our superior status. We know who we are by knowing who we are not.

But there are those who say exclusions can get out of hand. When they become a way of life, they narrow us down. We 'circle the wagons,' but we may circle them too tightly. In our desire not to be infringed upon, we may be pushing away the very thing, person, situation, feeling, thought, and experience we need. A friend of mine is fond of saying, "We avoid with a passion the very thing that will SAVE us."

Jesus' name means "He will SAVE His people from their sins." (Mt 1:21). To save us from our sins is to bring us out of separation and into communion, to connect us with God, neighbor, and our true self. This is the offer of Jesus to the religious leadership of His day. His liberating consciousness and inclusive behavior are what they – and we—need. Jesus is asking them – and us – to relate to the God of all people by including all people. He is asking that we join the party, but we cannot tolerate such a motley collection of characters. We choose to remain in our isolation. We are often better at shunning than welcoming.

There are a number of reasons for this, but from a spiritual standpoint, there is a dark desire lurking behind all of our rationalizations: "Come, let us kill him and get his inheritance." We want it all. And we want it all for ourselves. We don't want to share what we have with those immigrants, those illegals. We don't think God's mercy extends to people we disagree with or don't like, to members of the LGBTQ community, or the poor we deem as lazy. We do not want to be accountable to God or other people. Our isolation has turned us greedy. We grab for everything we can get. For us, 'including' only means there will not be enough for me – enough money, enough prestige, enough land, enough everything. We see the world as a place of scarcity, and we want to make sure that 'we get ours.' When more are included, we instinctively feel that we will have less. We exclude because we want it all.

Wanting it all is a crazy desire, born of isolation and fear. Its social face is acquisition and greed. Its psychological face is accusation and defensiveness. Its theological face is believing in a God I own rather than

a God who owns me. The truth is we do not own the vineyard; we are called to work in it. When we want it all, we inherit nothing. (adapted from Shea, ON EARTH AS IT IS IN HEAVEN, p. 294-296)

Finally, another take on this, inspired and adapted from the DIALOGUE OF ST. CATHERINE OF SIENA. Imagine that just before a soul begins his or her earthly journey, God takes them by the hand and points out a certain place on earth. God then explains to the about-to-be-conceived: "This is going to be your piece of the vineyard. It will be yours to make of it whatever you can. All I ask is that you work it as best you can and get the most out of the soil and the shoots I give you. If you produce grapes that become the choice wine of reconciliation and justice, great; if you only have enough water and nutrients to produce a few grapes that make a small amount of the sherry of humility and kindness, good; if you only have enough time to plant a few seeds or start a few vines that others can bring to a full harvest, you'll have done well."

But God cautions: "Just don't make the mistake that too many of my tenants make. They get too caught up in the number of grapes that they can coax from the vines. My vineyard is about harvesting good grapes, not amassing profits.

"Remember, too, that you are responsible for the part of the vineyard I give you. Don't exhaust the grapes you harvest for yourself alone and then leave nothing behind but a dried, hollow tangle of dead vines for the next grower. I will demand a price for what you produce – and what you squander.

"Keep in mind," God the vineyard owner continues, "that everyone has his or her own piece of the vineyard. But there are no dividing lines, no fences, no property markers. Your part of the vineyard is joined to your neighbor's – so you can do neither good nor evil in your vineyard without affecting the folks next to you and the vines around you."

Finally, God says: "One more thing. And I don't mean to harp on this, but it IS my vineyard. Not yours. I'm giving you a piece of it because that's what being God is all about. An occasional thank you would be nice. But the moment you think this vineyard is yours or that you deserve more and better, your vineyard will become a very unhappy and unproductive place.

"So, go to it."

And then God breathes that soul into a human embryo, and another adventure begins.

Enjoy the adventure; work for a harvest; remember the owner. Amen. (adapted from CONNECTIONS, 8 October 2023, p. 3)