

July 22, 2007

"Whose Vineyard Is It?"

Luke 20:9-29

(Luke 20:9-19 NRSV) He began to tell the people this parable: "A man planted a vineyard, and leased it to tenants, and went to another country for a long time. {10} When the season came, he sent a slave to the tenants in order that they might give him his share of the produce of the vineyard; but the tenants beat him and sent him away empty-handed. {11} Next he sent another slave; that one also they beat and insulted and sent away empty-handed. {12} And he sent still a third; this one also they wounded and threw out. {13} Then the owner of the vineyard said, 'What shall I do? I will send my beloved son; perhaps they will respect him.' {14} But when the tenants saw him, they discussed it among themselves and said, 'This is the heir; let us kill him so that the inheritance may be ours.' {15} So they threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. What then will the owner of the vineyard do to them? {16} He will come and destroy those tenants and give the vineyard to others." When they heard this, they said, "Heaven forbid!" {17} But he looked at them and said, "What then does this text mean: 'The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone'? {18} Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls." {19} When the scribes and chief priests realized that he had told this parable against them, they wanted to lay hands on him at that very hour, but they feared the people.

Sometimes, I have to wonder? "What Were You Thinking?" Last spring, Kathy told me that she wanted to focus on the PARABLES of Jesus this summer, and wanted Jeff and I to preach on those themes. She gave me a list of parables that they would be using — And because the Sunday School focuses on a parable for two weeks in a row, I had to fill in the alternating weeks with a parable of my choosing.

Well, when I sat down to do that, I ran through all the parables and chose the ones that I thought would be good. I picked parables such as: the prodigal son, the lost sheep, the unjust steward, the parable of the new cloth/new wine, but then I also picked the story of the wicked tenants in the vineyard. And as I sat down to work on this sermon, all I could think was — why did you pick that one? I mean, come on, it is a terrible story.

Just to tell you how bad of a story it is, I have a book called: "*Hard Sayings of the Bible.*" Guess what, even they did not want to talk about this hard and difficult saying.

I guess, maybe the authors of the *Hard Saying* book thought that this parable

is no big deal, that the point is very obvious, so it isn't a hard saying at all, and on the surface, I would agree, but, if one takes the time and really digs into this parable, it can have some very difficult implications.

So lets take a look.

I want to read the story again to you — just in case you missed it the first time, and this time I will read it from *The Message*.

9-12 Jesus told another story to the people: "A man planted a vineyard. He handed it over to farmhands and went off on a trip. He was gone a long time. In time he sent a servant back to the farmhands to collect the profits, but they beat him up and sent him off empty-handed. He decided to try again and sent another servant. That one they beat black-and-blue, and sent him off empty-handed. He tried a third time. They worked that servant over from head to foot and dumped him in the street.

13 "Then the owner of the vineyard said, 'I know what I'll do: I'll send my beloved son. They're bound to respect my son.'

14-15 "But when the farmhands saw him coming, they quickly put their heads together. 'This is our chance—this is the heir! Let's kill him and have it all to ourselves.' They killed him and threw him over the fence.

15-16 "What do you think the owner of the vineyard will do? Right. He'll come and clean house. Then he'll assign the care of the vineyard to others."

Those who were listening said, "Oh, no! He'd never do that!"

17-18 But Jesus didn't back down. "Why, then, do you think this was written:

That stone the masons threw out—

It's now the cornerstone!?

"Anyone falling over that stone will break every bone in his body; if the stone falls on anyone, it will be a total smashup."

19 The religion scholars and high priests wanted to lynch him on the spot, but they were intimidated by public opinion. They knew the story was about them.

Most scholars would argue that this is not a "real" story that is being told, but is rather an allegory. Read that way, the story is pretty simple.

Remember where this story is found in Luke's gospel — it takes place right before we begin the passion story. That is a significant detail, because this story, when told as allegory, clearly points to the impending death of Jesus.

The owner of the vineyard is God.

The farmhands - the tenants - are Israel (or at least the religious leaders of Israel)

The son is, well, the son (Jesus)

And the others who the vineyard will be given over to are the Apostles or maybe even the early church.

So what is this story telling us?

There is no indication in this story that the farmhands have been dilatory in their efforts, actually, the story seems to suggest that they have done a great job with the vineyard. But when the owner sends someone to claim his share of the proceeds — the workers decide to keep it for themselves.

First they beat up three messengers, sent by the owner (God), who are clearly meant to symbolize the way Israel treated the prophets.

God sent prophets to show Israel the way — but Israel refused to listen.

So the owner decides to send his son.

But why kill the son?

Well, there is a tradition, that if a man dies heir-less, the workers of his property will get to keep it.

This story is telling us that those who have tried to usurp the vineyard for themselves, will lose it — actually have it taken away, and it will be given to somebody else.

The promise of Israel is taken away and now given to the church.

That is the traditional view of this parable.

But you should know by now, that I can't simply stop there.

Does anybody know what happened on May 25<sup>th</sup>, 1977?

Star Wars was released.

I was one of those crazy people who stood in line to watch this film — I was

just finishing my junior year in High School.

I was a budding movie maker in High School.

My high school offered a class in the history of movies, as well as a class in the art of movie making. And I loved them both. Mr. Utley demanded that we go and see this film — not because of the story, but because of the cutting edge technology that George Lucas used in the film.

I remember walking out of that theater mesmerized.

As a matter of fact, before the first week of the movie was over, I had seen it 3 more times (we sat through 3 showings the next night!), and 5 more showings within another couple of weeks.

That movie captured my imagination and made my heart soar. But more than that, I think the underlying themes of the movie spoke to my soul — but that is another story.

I haven't seen anything like that — until Friday night. Maybe it was there before, but it was not real to me like Friday night was.

Do you know where I was Friday night?

I was in line at midnight at Meijer's waiting to get a copy of *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*.

Now, while maybe that isn't totally crazy, in a minute you will think that I have lost all my senses.

Jessica, my 19 year old, college sophomore — who has made the dean's list at Butler, both semesters — was in line at Borders, across the street to get a copy.

And in case you are curious. The parking lot at Borders, when I left Meijer's at 12:30, was full all the way back to the old Jewel building.

What makes this even more insane is that I had ordered a copy of the book from Amazon which was delivered yesterday.

So why was I in line?

Lindsey and Haley left Saturday morning at 5:30 am, with the youth for the mission trip, and were desperate to have a copy to read on the way down to

Louisiana.

When we got home from Meijer. Jessica was already at home dancing in the kitchen, excited about reading the book, and planning on staying up all night to do so. By the way, she has already finished it, and said it was the best one yet.

We have been on the Harry Potter bandwagon since the very beginning.

We were early readers of the Harry Potter series, actually reading a British version of the first book, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*. Ever since then, we as a family have been hooked.

What has amazed me all along is how “the church” has reacted to it. Conservative Christianity has branded the stories evil and told their members that they are not to read them, or allow their children to read them.

Why?

Well, the official line is that there are witches and witchcraft in the story and that we should not expose our children to them.

Anybody ever looked at 1 Samuel 28?

But I don't think that is the real reason.

Sure, there is an anti-intellectual bias in conservative Christianity, but I think it has more to do with authority and power.

Remember our parable?

There are a group of people who say — this vineyard, even though we are just the stewards — the hired hands — we think that it is ours. And we are going to decide who gets in and who doesn't.

Sounds familiar doesn't it!

Too often, the church has fallen into the trap of thinking that we own the church — that it was created just for us, and it is our little club.

We decide who gets in and who doesn't.

Just the other day, Pope Benedict XVI said that YOU don't go to a real church — that you are not a part of the vineyard — that only the Roman Catholic

church is the real church — that they are the tenders of the vineyard, and that they can decide who is in and who is out.

But let's be careful here — we do the same thing. When somebody comes who doesn't fit our mold, we let them know — sometimes subtly — and sometimes not so subtly — that this is OUR church and that they are not welcome.

Matthew Fox, the great Creation Spiritualist of our day argues that we as Christians need to see ourselves in post denominational ways — that it is not about being a part of this denomination or that denomination, — it is about being rooted in the vineyard of Jesus.

And Jesus wants to welcome EVERYONE to the vineyard.

So we have got to quit thinking that we own it, and instead get excited about sharing what we have.

And if we don't?

The story tells us then that what we have will be taken from us, and given to others.

Unfortunately, this is way too true!