

‘Owning and being owned’. Sermon first preached by Dr Christine Hoffman at FUMC Palmetto, October 5<sup>th</sup> 2008

Have you ever wondered why Jesus told so many parables? I believe the answer to this question is quite simple. Jesus told so many parables because people like stories. We all like stories, don’t we? They are so much easier to listen to than sermons. But some of Jesus’ parables are quite disturbing, aren’t they? The other Sunday morning, we heard a parable about laborers in a vineyard grumbling because the landowner gave everyone the same wage even though they hadn’t worked equal lengths of time. Jesus, you remember, wanted to shock people into realizing that God does not owe them anything. Out of his generosity, he gives all of us his undeserved love. But who was that parable aimed at? At first, it seems to have been aimed at Peter and the other disciples wondering how God is going to reward them big-time for all the efforts they have put in. Well, that’s good, we think. As long as the parable isn’t aimed at us. But why do we bother still reading these parables? Surely, it’s because most of us at times have a bit of Peter in us? Our attitude needs transforming. We are the ones who need to remember that it is God who owns the vineyard, who owns everything and he gives because of his generosity and not because of our deserving.

So what about today’s parable? Here Jesus goes again, talking about a landowner and his vineyard. This also is quite a shocking story. It has some disturbing violence in it. There is all that arbitrary cruelty when the slaves are sent to the tenants of the vineyard to collect the produce for the landowner. And what do the tenants do? They beat, stone, and kill the slaves. With exaggerated and improbable levels of patience, the story tells how the landowner keeps sending new slaves or agents. ‘What owner of a cherry-tree farm in Wisconsin, or a blue-berry grove in Maine, or a hillside of grapes in Napa Valley would behave with such patience, sending agent after agent to collect the produce, only to have their lives destroyed? The answer of course is none. No one we’re familiar with in our circles of life would ever display this kind of persistent attention. Why not attack the tenants, for goodness’ sake!’<sup>1</sup> But, instead the landowner tries sending his son. They will respect his son, he thinks. How wrong could he be? No, they kill him too, somehow believing that this means the vineyard will belong to them.

‘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 to the owner.’<sup>2</sup>

So who is this parable aimed at? Well, it’s clear, isn’t it? It’s the Jewish religious leaders who oppose Jesus. The chief priests and the Pharisees, Matthew tells us, ‘realized that he was speaking about them.’ Phew, that’s a relief. We thought as we heard the parable being read this morning that Jesus might be getting at us again. But no. It’s ‘them’. It’s other people. As long as it’s someone else who is being criticized, we can relax and just

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<sup>1</sup> Peter W Marty, in *The Lectionary Commentary* vol. 3, edit Roger E Van Harn, Eerdmans, 2001, p 123

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

enjoy the story, violence and all. But, wait a minute. Why did the chief priest and the Pharisees hear this parable as being directed at them? Because, as the saying goes: 'If the cap fits, wear it.' And the cap did fit. They were busy rejecting God's son. Why were they doing this? Wasn't it because he wasn't fitting in with their ideas of God and how things were in the world? Somehow, these religious leaders had got things topsy-turvy. They had come to believe that they were the ones in charge of the world, not God.

'Bash the Pharisees' time again. But this is to treat this parable as if it's just a story about the past. Pharisees and chief priests as religious groupings no longer exist today. They haven't existed for centuries. If we really are to hear the gospel, then we must have ears to hear. We must be addressed by it. Today this parable is not directed against 'them'. It is against us and our possessive attitudes to life. 'If the cap fits, wear it.' Unfortunately, we too can run the world as if we own the place. '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 owner 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.

So when the tenant farmers contemplate obtaining the inheritance of the owner, they're playing with the idea of owning what is not theirs to own. Since an inheritance is not something one gets for oneself or coerces for oneself, the very notion of inheriting the vineyard is a futile exercise. But its very nature, an inheritance is a gift that one cannot earn or arrange. The vinedressers in our story stand out for their confusion over ownership and loan.'<sup>3</sup> So, as we hear this parable, God is addressing us, each of us. He is challenging us to think seriously about the question: 'who owns what?'

Paul too in his letter to the Philippians is raising the question of ownership. He tells us that he has come through Christ to view things quite differently from how he viewed things when he was busy keeping the laws of Judaism. As a Pharisee, he had accumulated vast amounts of 'righteousness'. All this obedience to God he could claim as his own. 'It's mine'. Oh good, we say again; it's those wretched Pharisees who keep getting it wrong. But the people Paul was writing to in his letter to the Philippians were not Pharisees. He is telling them to reassess what they own, to do a completely new audit on their gains and losses. This image of gains and losses may well engage us today. 'Whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ', writes Paul. We might paraphrase this in words which may ring a bell with many people in the present economic crisis: 'In relation to God's audit in Jesus Christ, these things appear to be liabilities.' Paul puts it even more strongly when he describes all that he thought he owned as 'rubbish', refuse, empty pretense. Now this is surely no way to describe 'righteousness', all the good things we have done. But, says Paul, Christ has found him and redirected his life in such a way that he realizes that any righteousness of his own is so much garbage. Anything that makes us rely on our own claims to goodness are positive hindrances to living in the light of Christ's crucifixion and resurrection. This is the Christ I have come to know, says Paul. He, therefore, urges all his readers to seek

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid pp 123-4

this knowledge. This knowledge is not amassed data. This knowledge is rather a relationship that suffuses all that he is and does. It is transforming. He has gained Christ himself, not as another commodity but as a home, as a perspective. He has surrendered all his claims to God's grace entirely to Christ, so that Christ might possess him. Paul puts it in a wonderful phrase: 'Christ Jesus has made me his own.'

Paul admits that this is a life-long process of having our desires and affection and attention continually redirected and refocused by our knowledge of the crucified and resurrected Christ.' We've heard a lot about the term 'Refocus' in our church lately. And we aren't done yet. Towards the end of our focused living retreat recently, someone asked: what's the goal? This is a very good question. I draw on Paul for the answer. It is for the church and each individual within it to have their affections and attentions transformed by Christ. It is for all our living and acting to be fitting of our 'upward calling', not postponed till after death, but now. Focused living requires constant refocus on God as the owner of all that we have and all that we are. 'What is Paul advocating in these words? We often are unable to enjoy the present and to focus on what is truly important today because of guilt about our past and anxiety about our future. Guilt is the sense that we have done something wrong, whether it be a specific, all-too-well remembered act or a vague sense of being guilty without being able to put our finger on exactly what we did wrong. We can feel guilty only about the past; we cannot feel guilty about the future. Anxiety, on the other hand, is what we feel about the future; uncertainty about what may happen. Just as we cannot feel guilty about the future, we cannot be anxious about the past, although guilt and anxiety may be related. In his forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, Paul faces up to the past, present, and future.'

There can be no whole perspective on life ... that does not resolve our relationship with each of the three tenses of our life: past, present, and future. Paul covers all three in one sentence: "Forgetting what lies behind [past] and straining forward to what lies ahead [future], I press on [present]." He can make this statement with full conviction because the grace of God has resolved the guilt of his past and removed the anxiety about his future.

But we must read his statement in the light of what he has just said: "I am not yet perfect." The truth of God's grace is certain but our understanding and appropriation of that grace are not yet perfect. Growing in grace means learning more and more to live in the awareness that our guilt has been forgiven, that our future is secure in Christ, and that as a result we are truly free to live in the present. God will continue to do the work that he began in us when we came to Christ until we see him face-to-face.'<sup>4</sup> Jesus in the gospel and Paul in his letter challenge us this morning to take seriously the owner's absolute ownership of his property. They ask us to live believing in love God's absolute love for his world. We are then called not to a path of self-improvement, of upward religious mobility. We are called to let Christ take hold of us so that each of us can say: 'Christ Jesus has made me his own.'

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<sup>4</sup> Earl F. Palmer in *The Lectionary Commentary* vol. 2, edit Roger E Van Harn, Eerdmans, 2001 pp 361-2