

“The Pineapple Story” Ephesians 4: 1-7

Every once in a while we hear a story where the comments of a leader are reported in the news. I am thinking of the kind of comments that are made in private but become public because the leader didn't realize a microphone was on. Even though there was no microphone I want to share such a comment I made about this church, which I have been thinking a lot about.

I was having a conversation with a church member, (I will let them remain anonymous.). He or she commented about a meeting that we had been in, “They didn't like your idea very much.” To which I replied, “Well, this isn't my church.” The questioner looked at me with a questioning look. I just repeated my answer, “This isn't my church.”

Now those four words can have a whole variety of meanings depending on what tone you use and where you put the emphasis. The same phrase can be said in a resentful way, a resigned way, or a resolute way. But no matter the tone and no matter the motivation behind the tone, it leads to the question, “Well then, if this is not my church then whose church is it?”

I believe that is a good question to ask on Unity Sunday. Whose church is this, anyway? As I thought about that question I remembered a book I have on my bookshelf called “The Pineapple Story.” It is a story about ownership, and I want to tell it to you this morning.¹

It is about a missionary who answered God's call to serve Christ among the natives of Dutch New Guinea for a period of ten years. Their mission field was way back in the bush. This missionary especially liked pineapples so he decided to introduce pineapples to the people who lived there. Pineapples were his favorite fruit.

He ordered a hundred plants and when they were delivered he paid a local native to plant them for him and, of course paid him for his labor. They often paid in salt because that was highly valued among the natives. Pineapple plants grow very slowly. It takes about three years for them to mature. So it was with great anticipation around Christmas of that third year that they began to anticipate their ripening. The missionary and his wife would take walks in the evening to keep an eye on them. But finally when they did get ripe, they did not get a single pineapple! The natives stole every one. They stole them just before they were ripe, because they knew that if they waited for them to be ripe the owner would take them.

The missionary said, “Here I am getting mad at these people. Missionaries aren't supposed to get mad. You all know that. But he got angry. He said, “Look you

¹ The Pineapple Story. Published by Basic Youth Conflicts in 1978.

guys! I have been waiting for these pineapples for three years. I didn't get any of them. If any more of these pineapples are stolen, no more clinic for you."

His wife was running a clinic. They were knocking themselves out trying to help these people, taking care of their sick, saving the lives of their babies. One by one the pineapples got ripe, and one by one they were all stolen. The missionary felt he had to stand his ground with these people. He couldn't just let them run all over him, but that was not the real reason. The real reason was selfishness. He wanted to eat those pineapples. So no more clinic.

People came with bad pneumonia, coughing and asking for medicine. The missionaries told them, "No, remember you stole our pineapples." They would go on coughing and begging. They repeated, "No, you stole our pineapples."

"I didn't steal them. It was the other guys that did it." They would go on coughing and begging, and finally, the missionaries couldn't take it any longer. They reopened the clinic, and the pineapples were still being stolen.

"Man! Those rascals!" They finally discovered the thief. It was the man who had planted them in the first place. The missionary said, "Look buddy! What are you doing stealing my pineapples? You are my gardener."

He said, "My hands plant them. My mouth eats them. That is the rule of the jungle." If they plant something in the jungle, it is theirs. They had never heard of paying for services. So he said, "They are all mine."

The missionary said, "Oh no no! They are mine. I paid you to plant them." But he just couldn't understand how that made them my plants. So the missionary decided he better learn to live by their rules, and he offered to divide the field in half. The man nodded, but the pineapples still got stolen.

The missionary had another idea, "Maybe I should let them have all those pineapples and get some new ones for himself." That meant he would have to wait another three years to eat pineapples. So he said, "Look I give you all those pineapples out of my garden and I will start over. So you make a garden and take all these plants out so I will have room to plant new ones.

So they said, "Too-wan (which means "Outsider", foreigner) you will have to pay us."

He said, "Now look!" They said, "No, No! You are asking us to move your pineapple bushes and that is work." He said, "All right, I'll pay you one day's work. Take them all away."

Then they said, "We don't have a garden ready. Will you pay us to get it ready?"

He said, "Forget it!" He was fed up with them. He ended up just rooting them all out and throwing them all on the trash heap. If they wanted them they could just fend for themselves. So they did. Then the missionary bought all new plants.

He said, "Now look, all you guys, I am going to pay you to plant them, but I eat them, me and my family. You don't eat any." They said, "It doesn't work like that. If we plant them, we eat them."

The missionary said, Look! I just don't have time to keep a garden. There are so many of you, and there is only one of me. You have got to help me. I want you to plant them, and I will pay you. What do you want? I will give you this nice knife if you will agree to do it."

They thought about that, "He will pay us that knife so he can eat our pineapples." They finally agreed. For the next three years he kept reminding them, "Who is going to eat those pineapples?"

"You are." "Fine, Have you still got the knife?" "Yes." "Well, take good care of it." He knew that if the worker lost the knife he would have to start all over again. Finally, after three long years the pineapples began to ripen.

Once again the missionary and his wife took evening walks in the garden saying, "Pretty soon we are going to have a crop of our own pineapples." They thanked God that he was providing for them, but you know what happened? Every one of them was stolen!

They saw the natives go through the garden during the day to spot the ripe ones then at night they could go right to them. He came up with another idea. They would threaten to stop the trade store. That was where the natives got their matches, salt, fishhooks, and things like that. They used to do without things like that, so it wouldn't actually hurt them. So he announced, "No more store if you keep stealing my pineapples." They kept stealing.

After the store was closed the natives began to say, "If he is not going to have a store there is no advantage to being here with him so we might as well go back into the jungle." So they did, they took off to live again in the jungle.

The missionary was there eating pineapples, all by himself. No people. No ministry, but plenty of pineapples. He thought, "I can go back to the States and eat pineapples, if that is all we are going to do here." So he sent out a messenger, "The store will re-open next Monday." But he still wanted to eat his pineapples, so he got another idea. He got a dog, the biggest German Shepherd he could get.

Everyone was afraid of that dog. They had never seen a dog that big. That dog did the trick. The pineapples were safe, but most of the people didn't dare come

around anymore. The dog had the same result as closing the store. Plenty of pineapples but no people and no ministry. So he got rid of the dog and was right back where he started. The people came back and the pineapples were being stolen as fast as they got ripe.

The missionary was out of ideas until he was home on furlough. He attended a seminar where he learned that we must give everything we own to God. The Bible says if you give, you will have; if you keep for yourself, you will lose. Give your things to God, and God will see that you have enough. That is just Bible 101.

The missionary thought, "I don't have anything to lose. I will give that pineapple garden to God because I am not eating the pineapples anyway." That may not be the best of sacrifices because you are supposed to sacrifice something that is valuable to you. But he decided to give it to God and see if God would control it since it was obvious that he wasn't doing a very effective job of it.

When he got back he went out to the garden one night. He waited until everyone had gone home because he didn't want them to see him out there praying. He prayed, "Lord, see these pineapple bushes? I have fought to have fruit from them. I have claimed them. I have stood up for my rights. It is all wrong, and I realize it now. I admit I was wrong, and I give them to you. From now on, if you want me to eat any of your pineapples, fine. If not, fine. It really doesn't matter." So he gave them to God, and the natives went right on stealing them as usual.

The missionary prayed, "See God, you can't control them either!"

Then one day they came to the missionary and said, "Too-wan, you have become a Christian haven't you?"

The missionary started to react by saying, "Look here, I have been a Christian for twenty years." But instead he said, "Why do you say that?" They said, "Because you don't get angry anymore when we steal your pineapples."

The missionary realized that now he was living what he had been preaching to them. He had been telling them to love one another, be kind to one another, but at the same time he had insisted on standing up for his own rights, and they knew it.

One bright lad asked, "Why don't you get angry anymore?"

The missionary replied, "Because I have given that pineapple garden away. It isn't my garden anymore. So you are not stealing my pineapples, so I don't have to get angry anymore."

After thinking about this someone else asked, "So just who did you give this garden to?" They began to look around at each other, "Did he give it to you?" "Did he give it to you?" "Whose is it anyway?" "Whose pineapples are we stealing?"

The missionary replied, "I have given it to God."

"To God?!? Hasn't he got any pineapples of his own?"

"I don't know whether he has or not, but I have given it to God."

They went back to their village telling everyone, "Do you know whose pineapples we are stealing? Too-wan has given them to God."

They came back to the missionary, "Too-wan, you should not have done that. Why don't you get them back from God? No wonder we aren't getting the pigs when we go out hunting. No wonder our babies are getting sick. No wonder the fish aren't biting. We don't want to steal those pineapples if they belong to God."

They were afraid of God. The pineapples began to ripen. The natives came and said, "Too-wan, your pineapples are ripe."

"They are not mine. They belong to God."

But they said, "They are going to get rotten. You had better pick them."

And so the missionary picked some, and the villagers picked some, and when they sat down to eat them they prayed, "Lord, we are eating YOUR pineapples. Thank you for giving them to us."

The missionary realized that all these years he had been preaching one thing and practicing another. But when he began to change, so did the villagers as well. This principle of giving ownership of everything to God didn't necessarily get easier.

One time the missionaries son was very sick and near death. It was impossible to get him to a doctor, but he realized that he had never given his son to God! So he prayed an even more difficult prayer, "God, I give my son to you. Whatever you want to do is fine." That was much harder than giving a pineapple garden to God! But he prepared himself to accept whatever God gave him.

Then one day the missionary was reading the Bible, a not especially interesting part of the Old testament, but he read in Leviticus 19:23-25

"When you shall come into the land, and shall have planted all manner of trees for food ... three years shall it be as uncircumcised for you; it shall not be eaten

of. But in the fourth year all the fruit shall be holy with which to praise the Lord. And in the fifth year shall ye eat of the fruit thereof, that it may yield unto you the increase there of: I am the Lord your God.”

Finally, the missionary understood!

God never intended him to eat those pineapples the first year they were ripe. He wanted them dedicated to Him. Then he wanted the next crop to be dedicated to the natives so they could see good works and glorify his Father who was in heaven. If he had only done this, all the trouble he could have avoided.

So, that story is my answer to “This is not my church.” But I have a question for each of you. What is your pineapple garden? I believe most if not all of us have at least one if not several.

Your health? Your plans? Your job? Getting what you really, really want? Your money? Your possessions? Your hobbies? Your friends? Your opinions? Your reputation? Your favorite kind of music?

What in your life are you claiming possession of? And while we are at it, “Whose church is this, really?”

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

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