

The reading for today takes place *in* the Temple itself. Jesus has entered Jerusalem, although we're not going to read that story till Palm Sunday, and he's made trouble by overturning the tables of the moneychangers. The chief priests, scribes and elders come together to challenge Jesus; they see that he has the potential to unseat any or all of them in their positions of privilege. So Jesus tells them the parable of the vineyard, in which the tenants usurp the landlord's vineyard and abuse or kill every emissary he sends, even his beloved son. Jesus concludes that the owner will come and destroy the tenants and give the vineyard to others.

The vineyard is a longstanding metaphor for the reign of God. Isaiah writes in chapter 5, "My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. He dug it and cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines; he built a watch-tower in the midst of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it; he expected it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes." The poet goes on to say that the owner is now going to tear out the vineyard because of its poor yield, and then says, "For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the people of Judah are his pleasant planting; he expected justice, but saw bloodshed; righteousness, but heard a cry!"

Say what you will about the first-century religious authorities, they knew their scriptures, and they understand very well that Jesus has told this parable against them. They are the usurping tenants who have sucked up all the produce of the vineyard for their own and have cut off access to the landowner. They have been the ostensible caretakers of God's people, and they have used God's people to enrich and empower themselves rather than caring for the people in the way that God wants them cared for. The chief priests, scribes and elders are furious and want

to arrest him, but they are afraid of the crowd so they leave. Temporarily.

For Mark's audience, reading this story shortly after the destruction of the Temple and Jerusalem in 70, it was clear that the old had been swept away; God had come and destroyed the tenants and the "others" to whom God was giving the vineyard now was them, the followers of the Jesus movement. They had been the disestablished and disenfranchised, and now they were the new heirs, meant to carry on the work of producing fruits of peace, generosity, humility and justice.

All metaphors break down at a certain point; that's why they're metaphors instead of literal descriptions. This metaphor of inheritance breaks down at the point of *possession*. Normally, heirs take possession of their inheritance and we all understand that it's for their benefit; it's their property. In this case, the heirs take over the carrying of a mission, and by definition that mission is not for their profit, but for the well-being of everyone. The fledgling Jesus movement has inherited the mission to spread the good news of God's love and promise to *everyone*, not to keep it for themselves. The conventional meaning of inheritance is something you gather up for yourself; Jesus suggests that God's heirs inherit in order to give away—and it's in the giving away that they receive.

But this is a paradox. It's not a methodology or a mechanism that you can leverage. Minneapolis author Heather Bouwman points out that there's a certain line of thought that goes, "If I give generously to the church, God will provide for me and all my needs will be met." She writes,

It's part of the prosperity gospel tradition, and it is embodied when the preacher—or a congregant, giving his or her testimonial—stands up with a story about how, when they started giving money to the church, suddenly all their financial troubles (and also sometimes, relationship troubles) were

solved: a job materialized out of thin air, a promotion was unexpectedly given, back taxes were no longer owed, credit cards were paid off, a troubled marriage fixed itself.

Because the person tithed, God gave back.

I can't emphasize enough how irritated that kind of testimonial makes me.

Just once I'd love to hear someone stand up and say:

*I think you should tithe your income to good causes, even though doing so may make you poorer and increase your already hefty Visa debt—and it certainly won't help with those child support payments—and you can probably kiss that large-screen TV goodbye! I'm still waiting.*

Heather Bouwman says that as a writer, she's learned that you don't write in order to get published. There is not a publisher waiting with outstretched hands to take her next manuscript. A few times she has managed to get a book published, but more often she has not. So that's not why she writes. She doesn't write to get published, she writes because she loves the process.

The truth is I'd be writing even if there were no book contract, even if I were writing only for the trusty audience of my aged cat, who is too tired to leave the room when I read aloud from work in progress. The cat would be enough audience to keep me going, because I love writing itself.

<http://transformation-is-real.com/blog/2016/2/20/bouwman-writing-change>

The same holds true for inheritance of the vineyard. It's not *for* the heirs, at least not the heirs alone. It's for them to share and spread; sharing is where the benefit or the excellence of inheritance resides.

Mark's audience was the very new church, hardly even an institution yet. They could see how God might be substituting them for the Temple authorities, who had carried on the form of relationship with God but lost the content of it. But we are now the latest iteration of the very old and deeply compromised institution which that new church became. The question for us becomes, What do we consider to be our inheritance? What do we have to share that follows that ancient and

virtuous paradox in which the giving is the getting? In a post-Christian era, when words like “God” and “Jesus” resonate as bigoted and oppressive for many people, what’s our move? It seems that we have ourselves our own post-modern paradox, in which the language and labels of faith (God, Christian, cross) communicate their opposites (angry father, self-righteous hypocrite, ornament of privilege).

I am reminded of something St. Francis said: *We must bear patiently not being good . . . and not being thought good.* In other words, following Jesus means being aware of the ego and not taking it too seriously. The fact is that we and all people are made in the image of God; at our core we are good, although we never live that out fully. Even our failures are grist for the transformative mill of God; the cross epitomizes that. As Richard Rohr says, “The vulnerable person has every reason to keep growing through everything that happens to them. The overly guarded and self-protected person is scratched and dented by all “the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,” whereas the malleable, bendable, flexible, woundable person is almost indestructible. Their wounds are always allowed to be their teachers instead of their defeat.”

I think what we as the post-Christian church have to offer is freedom from ego, freedom to fail, freedom from defensiveness. People desperately need permission to be in process, daring and failing and daring again. It’s a cold, harsh world out there, and that’s not going to change anytime soon. One thing that the church can be is a school for humanness, in which we aren’t ashamed, in which we enjoy each other as we are and let our wounds become our teachers. As the church we are an institution in decline and often an object of derision. As Christians we are

followers of a teacher who failed spectacularly. Our constant practice is to know that it's not about us, it's not about numbers, it's not about prestige or fame! Our constant practice is to detect the hand of God doing redemptive things, to recognize the holy in secular places, to sing wholeheartedly and love the singing more than the song. The church can be a school for abundant living, I think, and in offering that of course we acknowledge ourselves to be its first students.

Let us pray:

God who is beyond comprehension, help us to know you simply as love. Bring us back to ourselves as your image, free us from fear and shame, and show us how to live wisely and joyfully with one another. Amen.