

What Did You Think Was Going to Happen?

Shepherd's Grace Church

October 5, 2014

Listen to another parable. There was a landowner who built a vineyard. He planted a fence around it, dug a winepress in it, and built a watch tower on it. Then the landowner leased the vineyard to tenants and went off to another country. When the time came for harvest, he sent his slaves to get his produce. The tenants, however, beat one, killed another, and stoned the other. After a time, the landowner sent other slaves, this time more than the first. The tenants did the same thing to them. Finally the landowner said, "I will send my son, they will respect my son."

When the tenants saw that the landowner had sent his son, they said to one another, "Look, it is the heir!" If we kill him we will get his inheritance." So the tenants seized the son, killed him and threw him out of the vineyard. "What do you think will happen when the landowner goes to his vineyard?"

They replied, "He will kill those wretched ones with a miserable death and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him his produce. Jesus said, "Have you heard the scripture that is written, "The stone the builders rejected has become the corner stone?" This is the Lord's doing and it is amazing in our eyes! Whoever falls upon this stone will be broken in pieces and whomever this stone falls upon will be crushed. For this reason, the kingdom of heaven will be taken from you and given to others who will produce fruit for the kingdom.

When the Chief Priests and the Pharisees heard this they realized he was talking about them and they wanted to arrest him but they were afraid of the crowds for they thought he was a prophet. (Matt. 21: 33-46) (Also read Phil 3: 4-14)

Like sands through the hour glass, these are the days of our lives. So goes the opening of the long running soap opera show and so, for some of us goes the reality about our lives. We live out each day piling one on top of the last and thinking, I believe that today is determined by yesterday. There is a certain predictability in life when looked at this way isn't there. Things are comfortable for us when they go along as expected! It is "nice to know what is going to happen!

Paul understood this predictability as is evidenced by the words he wrote to the Philippians. He was born a Jew. His parents took care to see that the practices of Judaism were instilled in him. He was baptized, he was trained and he learned what was right! He exercised this knowledge in the persecution of the church and when he was Saul, killing Christians and bringing others before the leaders of the Synagogue for prosecution. He obeyed the laws of Rome and exercised all the privileges of citizenship. He knew how his life was going to turn out! "Like sands through the hour glass, so were the days of the life of Paul!"

Like the Apostle Paul, we can claim a certain confidence from that which we have accomplished. Yesterday we had a successful steak fry. During the course of the week I did not talk to anyone who thought we were going to have other than a successful event. Everyone was confident in the job they

had to do. Everyone felt prepared to do the job! Everyone did their job and the event came off pretty much without a hitch! I say pretty much because there were a couple of hitches. Those here at the end of the serving know we ran out of potatoes! That's right, we ran out of potatoes! When you serve a steak dinner in the middle part of the United States, you have to have a potato to go with the steak but we ran out! How could that have happened? We bought as many bags of potatoes this year as we had purchased last and yet we ran out!

We also ran out of Texas Toast! We ran out of bread! Look behind me at this moment! We have set before us today f different kinds of bread! In just a few minutes I am going to offer you a meal consisting only of bread and cup. When we are done, there will be plenty left over! How could we, a church built on the bread of life find ourselves out of bread during the biggest fund raising event of our church year? It has never happened before that we should run out of bread. We built our this year plan for bread for the steak fry based on last year. Like sands through the hour glass, we stacked our potato needs and our bread needs on the needs of yesterday and yet, those needs fell short today! What we expected to happen did not happen! The sands in the hour glass did not build upon one another. The past did not support our present reality!

That in a way, is what Paul is telling us this morning! Confidence in what we have done does not give us reason to boast. Our accomplishments, no matter how laudable are not an indicator of our future results. Our accomplishments can help us move on. For example we would have no idea how many potatoes to start with if we did not have some idea of how many we used in the past. Just so, we have no way of knowing God's plan for us if we do not rely on our experience to tell us. Just like yesterday, however, there are always variables, there are always mysteries, there are always surprises!

How then, do we respond to the surprise? How do we deal with the unknown? If we build upon the past and history does not accurately predict the future, what are we to do? It would have been easy for us yesterday to point fingers, to get upset, to place blame. It was Joe's fault there were not enough potatoes! It was Fred's fault! It was Donna's fault we ran out of bread! That is the way the world would have done it. Something went wrong! Someone is to blame! Someone has to be accused and punished! When it was my turn to eat, all the pie was gone! Who did not make enough pie? I wanted pie and I got none! Who is to blame for that! Someone has to be punished!

This expectation, this feeling of confidence in the past that Paul puts forth this morning prepares us for the words we hear in the gospel. The feeling is the same one that the Pharisees and elders felt as they stood before Jesus. They knew that they were prepared to deal with today because they had the righteousness of yesterday upon which to stand. They had the Law of Moses and they were the interpreters and explainers of the law! They were authority and no one was able to set himself or herself above them. This was their attitude and it governed their every action! Like Sands through the hour glass, they believed their tomorrows were built upon their yesterdays! They believed their actions were right and that the actions of the world were the actions which governed the lives of the people.

It is from this state of mind that they hear the words of the parable today. From a position in the world, from a position of confidence, from a position of power and authority, from a position of right they hear

the parable that Jesus shares. There was a landowner who built a vineyard. The landowner built a fence of hedge around it. In this way, the world would know that the landowner intended to protect the vineyard from wild animals and from people who would come to steal, to kill and to destroy! (John 10: 10) The elders accepted the building as a common and wise thing to do! After all, it is right to protect that which one owns. It is right to guard your possessions and build them up so that what was gained yesterday can be increased today! That is the way of the world! The priests and the elders were confident in their hearing!

The man dug a winepress into the vineyard, thus improving it and allowing it to be even more productive. With the winepress, the vineyard would be even more valuable. It would be self sustaining. It would be able to not only produce the grapes but bring forth from the grapes something even more valuable, the wine! The priests and elders could see the value of the man's actions. He was using what he had gained to make even more. He was creating something valuable and which could be bartered and bought and sold! He was building on the land that he had yesterday and increasing the value of it! This was what the world did! The world worked to increase that which was possessed, to build on and improve that which was gained yesterday!

And the man built a watchtower on the land. The elders and priests would have known that the builder intended to keep and maintain the land for a long time. To watch over it would have indicated that he was interested and concerned for its progress and for its production. They would have heard this phrase of Jesus' parable and thought as the world thinks that the man was wise in the ways of the world, that the man was prudent in his building and that the man was going to be blessed as he watched over his possession that it would be fruitful and yield great results!

Then the man leased that which he had built. In hearing this, the priests and elders would have found the man shrewd. He could collect rent and rest in security for all of his life! From the perspective of the world, the man would be blessed and could live long and prosper because he had built successfully upon that which he acquired and developed. His future was built upon his past!

Then the twist came for the priests and the elders. The tenants to whom the man leased his land tried to cheat him. They tried to rob him of what was rightfully his! They tried to remove from him that which he had worked on. They tried to tear down what he built yesterday so that he could have no tomorrow and the elders and priests were outraged! They recognized the injustice of the tenants! They knew exactly how to deal with them! They knew exactly what should be done! The law was clear and they were prepared to follow the law! That is what good Jews were taught to do! That is what Paul taught us from this morning did he not?

Those who were raised up in the right and correct traditions of faith were required to obey the law! There was no deviation from the law. There was only justice as justice had been practiced in the world from the time which they knew it! They could have confidence in justice for justice was given to them yesterday and they seized their authority from it. They claimed the world in the name of the justice they were powerful enough to put into practice! In just a short time they would claim that justice for themselves once again!

He has blasphemed! They would say! Crucify him! They would say! He is not of us! They would say! We have no king but Caesar! They would say! Crucify him! Crucify him! That is justice! For what he has done yesterday, he must pay today! Crucify him! He has built his tomorrow not on yesterday! He has denied the law and the teachings and he has claimed to be that which he cannot be because he was not born to this yesterday! He is building on what he claims as the future but we all know that our days are built on the past, on tradition and on law! Crucify him!

The elders and priests were certain their answer was the correct one when Jesus asked, "What do you think the landowner will do when he comes to the vineyard?" They knew that the law was right. They knew you obeyed the law and if you did not obey the law you would be punished. They knew that murder was an offense punishable by death. They knew that the tenants were sinful and as Paul would teach later, the wages of sin is death! They knew what these wretches deserved and they shouted loudly that when the landowner came they would get exactly what they deserved! They would be put to a miserable death, these wretches who were unwilling to give to the owner what was due! They knew these tenants had built their today on an unfaithful yesterday and that they deserved to die!

Imagine if you will how Jesus heard their answer. He knew they would crucify him, they would convict him of crimes of which he was not guilty. In the same way they were willing to convict these tenants who withheld that which was due the landowner, they would convict him. Jesus knew this about the elders and the chief priests. He knew that they would judge by their own standards. He knew they would use law and legal systems to justify their actions. He knew they had no compassion for others who acted differently from them. He knew they were the Saul's of their generation, willing to punish those who acted in ways other than the ways in which they had been trained. He also knew that the tenants were indeed worthy of punishment, even death because of the crimes for which they were guilty.

As Jesus heard the answer of the priests and Pharisees, he recognized their failure to hear his message of Love and Hope and Compassion for others. He knew they had come out to him because he was creating divisions among the people and they wanted to put an end to his ministry. He knew they could not hear all God wanted to communicate. They were indeed the brood of vipers John had spoken of when he first proclaimed the message of forgiveness and repentance! (Matt. 3) For this reason, Jesus opened to them a reality they were not prepared to hear.

Instead of agreeing with them, Jesus asked them a question. Questions are intended to provoke thought. Questions are intended to offer alternatives and provoke new strategies. Jesus asked the leaders, "What did you think was going to happen?" Well, he didn't ask in exactly those words but he did ask them in that vein! They had told him what the men deserved. They had interpreted the law and were prepared to hear that the tenants got exactly what they deserved but Jesus wanted them to know another possibility.

The words he used were, "do you know the scripture where it says, 'The stone the builders rejected will become the corner stone?'" You and I can hear their eager affirmation. Of course we know! Psalm 118 right! We know our Torah! We can quote it to you chapter and verse! What is your point!

Then Jesus goes on to make his point. The stone the builders reject is not the expected stone. The stone the builders reject is regarded as weak, inferior because it is believed that this stone cannot stand up to the weight of the structure that will be constructed upon it. This stone, however regarded by the judgment of the world is regarded in high esteem by God! The choice of this stone is God's choice and it is amazing in our sight. This stone does not support the weight of the world's judgments because of its strength or its beauty but because of the power of God's Holy Spirit sustaining it through the ages! (Zech. 4) This stone is the same stone Jesus affirmed in chapter 14 when Peter professed it!

The stone is the rock of faith upon which God will build God's church. The stone is not perfect or pretty but it is constant and any worldly thing that comes against it will be broken because its strength comes not from the world but from trust in the one who created the world! The weight of the stone will crush the judgments of the world because the faith that comes from the stone invites a grace that exceeds justice according to the law!

The point Jesus wants to make to the Pharisees and the elders is that it is not the law that determines life. Life comes as we recognize the frailties and faults of others and are willing to look beyond them to the possibilities that might exist. The amazing part of the work accomplished by God is not that it follows the law but that it interprets the law not with a strict and oppressive standard but with grace! This grace is not earned or deserved but it is given by one who loves us enough to send even His Only Son! This grace is given even when we stand and shout, "Crucify Him, Crucify Him!" It is given when we watch from the margins as the world beats and tortures and kills the son!

In this understanding the simile is revealed. God is the landowner. The vineyard is Israel. The hedge is God's protection and the winepress is the proof that God intends the land to produce abundant fruit. The watchtower is for the faithful. It is a place to seek out God and recognize his gifts in that which is growing! It is a place where the faithful find an opportunity to climb above the world and watch for something spectacular to happen!

The tenants are those entrusted with cultivating the vineyard. They are to produce good fruit! They are to return that fruit to the landowner as evidence of their faithfulness. When Jesus introduces God's grace into the conversation, the Pharisees and elders, who are the tenants, recognize that Jesus is talking about them and their failure to recognize God's grace above the law! They realize that the landowner does not want to destroy the vineyard, or even destroy those who have cheated him and robbed him. The landowner only wants justice. His justice, however is not that they be put to death but that they be forgiven (Zech 4) and that they begin to produce by interpreting the law with compassion and not with oppression!

The response given by the Pharisees and elders is a response of the world. Jesus tries to teach them another alternative. When they fail to listen, when they can only think of what they will be losing, when they desire to arrest him, that is when he announces that the kingdom will be taken from them and given to others who will produce fruit, who will share grace, who will recognize that God's justice goes beyond the justice of the world.

Jesus wants the leaders, Jesus wants us to understand that it is not by pointing fingers and assigning blame that the world is to be cultivated. Jesus wants them, Jesus wants all of us to recognize that all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God! (Rom. 3) He wants us to know that finger pointing and accusations will not and should not be the standard upon which the church is built!

The stone that the builders rejected is the stone of support, the stone of faith, the stone of love that moves beyond the shortcomings of others and allows us to see that none is perfect but that together we can move closer to perfection in the presence of the one who created us. This is God's work and it is amazing in our eyes! It is amazing because God accomplishes it in spite of our willingness to destroy the messengers, to kill the prophets who were the first and second groups sent to collect the produce and even to kill the son, God's only son!

The leaders of Jesus' day were not willing to accept this strategy. They were not able to set aside the power they had been given and as a result, the conflict between them and Jesus would continue...but how about us? How about the people of Shepherd's Grace? How do we receive this news? How do we hear this message?

I believe we hear with the last phrase shared by Paul this morning. "But now, I move forward building on the future and not on the past!" This paraphrase reminds us that the sands of the hourglass do not fall on that which already was but on that which is to be. We do not build our faith on the past! The past cannot be changed. Instead, we build our faith on the future, on possibility, on the purpose and passion of God who is calling us irreversibly into a kingdom where great fruit can and will be produced. Our strength, the stone upon which we are built is not a perfect stone that is polished and beautiful, it is a stone hewn of rough edges and sharp corners. It is a stone that can shatter and break but it is also a stone that is capable of withstanding great temptation!

Yesterday, we demonstrated our willingness to build on that stone as we reacted with love and compassion in those situations where mistakes were made. We did not point fingers when we ran out of potatoes. We did not assign blame when we ran out of bread! Instead, we pulled together to solve the problems of the moment, confident that the solutions would be in our love for one another and not in our assignment of blame! We responded in the spirit upon which we are named. We responded in Grace!

When Jesus asks what will happen when the landowner shows up, we responded not with death but with life. When God comes he will judge! He will hold us accountable but in the end, He will forgive not because we deserve it but because His son, His Only Son carried the burden of our past and overcame that burden with a promise of bountiful future. As you think of all you know about God and God's love I ask the question again, "What did you think was going to happen?" Amen!