

“Almighty and everlasting God, you are always more ready to hear than we to pray, and to give more than we either desire or deserve...” So begins the Collect for the Day. God is generous toward all beyond our wildest imagining. Matthew is living in a time of great turbulence. The great Temple of Jerusalem has been destroyed by the Romans and I think Matthew tells this story to encourage his dis-spirited and frightened congregation.

Matthew’s community is a distinct religious minority with little societal or religious power. They are caught up in a bitter rivalry with other Jewish communities, and are uncertain and fearful of their future after the destruction of the Temple. Hence, Matthew uses this violent rhetoric to blast his enemies, particularly the Pharisees.

Now, whatever we may think of Matthew’s rhetorical decisions, we can put them to a better use than he imagined. The violent answer the Pharisees give Jesus is the right answer, at least according to the world. The landowner has every right to punish the tenants for their refusal to pay him his due and every right to put them to death for their treatment of his servants and for their murder of his son. It is the right answer, the answer Jesus’ audience expects, the answer the world demands.

But Jesus does not give this answer. Remember parables are pictures of what the kingdom of God looks like. By throwing everyday events and persons together in unexpected ways, Jesus’ parables point to *who God is, how God acts, and how we are expected to live in light of all this*. Which means that while the answer the chief priests and elders and Pharisees give is the right answer according to everything we’ve learned from our life in the world, it’s not the answer God looks for. In fact, the whole biblical story offers another answer. Beginning way back in the Book of Genesis, we hear God make covenant with Abraham saying, “I will bless you that you may be a blessing to the nations of the world.” And that golden cord runs throughout Scripture all the way to John’s gospel: “For God so loved the world...”.

In the end, this parable isn’t about wicked tenants... or Pharisees... or Matthew’s community... or even us. It’s about God: God, the one who entrusted us with all good things, blessing us beyond the dreams of our grandparents. God the one who, even when disappointed by what we do with those blessings, still comes to us in love. God the one who weeps over the injustices of the world, embraces those who fall short, and promises to never give up on anyone. Not those tenants. Not Matthew with his penchant for violent rhetoric. Not even us, when we refuse to recognize others as God’s beloved children and instead view them as competitors or threats.

When we hold the parable lightly and set it free from its original context, we discover that it invites us to ask a more personal and pertinent question: What will we do? Will we hoard our blessings or share them? Will we embrace those in need or shun them? Will we use our privilege to work for greater equity and justice for others or to secure our own future? Will we reach out to the Christ we perceive in our neighbor or only come to worship the Christ of the stained glass that adorns our comfortable church?

I’m not saying our salvation hangs in the balance in how we answer these questions. God who loves wicked tenants, incaltrant Pharisees, overly zealous evangelists, and painfully comfortable Christians alike has already seen to that. We do not have to save the world; Jesus

has already accomplished that. We are saved by grace. This is about the quality and character of our lives as Christians. Because now that we know ourselves to be those God loves unabashedly and shamelessly – now that we know ourselves to be the ones for whom God risked everything – we are free to live with courage, hope, and generosity. Having been healed, we can now offer to heal others. Having been reconciled, we can be instruments of reconciliation. Having tasted the mercy of God’s justice, we can risk ourselves in working for greater justice for others. And having been blessed beyond measure, we can be a blessing to those around us.

The landowner who owns all, has entrusted us with so much, continues to come to us in grace even when we’ve fallen woefully short, is eager to hear...to help...to heal.

Last Wednesday, we celebrated the feast of Francis of Assisi and following prayers for healing, we concluded with the well beloved prayer attributed to Francis. Perhaps today would be good time for us to do the same:

Lord, make us instruments of your peace. Where there is hatred, let us sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is discord, union; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; where there is sadness, joy. Grant that we may not so much seek to be consoled as to console; to be understood as to understand; to be loved as to love. For it is in giving that we receive; it is in pardoning that we are pardoned; and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life. Amen.

—*The Book of Common Prayer, page 833*

The Rev. Paul Briggs
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