

High Cost of Doing Business
A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Wm. D. Peterson
Coeur d'Alene First Presbyterian Church
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World Communion Sunday & the Sunday when
the PC(USA) Peacemaking Offering is Received

Text: Matthew 21:33-46 *Parable of the Evil Farmers* New Living Translation (NLT)

³³ “Now listen to another story. A certain landowner planted a vineyard, built a wall around it, dug a pit for pressing out the grape juice, and built a lookout tower. Then he leased the vineyard to tenant farmers and moved to another country. ³⁴ At the time of the grape harvest, he sent his servants to collect his share of the crop. ³⁵ But the farmers grabbed his servants, beat one, killed one, and stoned another. ³⁶ So the landowner sent a larger group of his servants to collect for him, but the results were the same.

³⁷ “Finally, the owner sent his son, thinking, ‘Surely they will respect my son.’

³⁸ “But when the tenant farmers saw his son coming, they said to one another, ‘Here comes the heir to this estate. Come on, let’s kill him and get the estate for ourselves!’ ³⁹ So they grabbed him, dragged him out of the vineyard, and murdered him.

⁴⁰ “When the owner of the vineyard returns,” Jesus asked, “what do you think he will do to those farmers?”

⁴¹ The religious leaders replied, “He will put the wicked men to a horrible death and lease the vineyard to others who will give him his share of the crop after each harvest.”

⁴² Then Jesus asked them, “Didn’t you ever read this in the Scriptures?

‘The stone that the builders rejected has now become the cornerstone. This is the Lord’s doing, and it is wonderful to see.’

⁴³ I tell you, the Kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a nation that will produce the proper fruit. ⁴⁴ Anyone who stumbles over that stone will be broken to pieces, and it will crush anyone it falls on.

⁴⁵ When the leading priests and Pharisees heard this parable, they realized he was telling the story against them—they were the wicked farmers. ⁴⁶ They wanted to arrest him, but they were afraid of the crowds, who considered Jesus to be a prophet.

The Sermon

Throughout history it is clear that countless people have relished reading the Scriptures. Whether or not those who purchase the Bible also spend time in reading and reflecting on it is not clear. That the Bible is the best-selling book in history is, however, clear.

Seattle Pacific University alum and retired Presbyterian minister Eugene Peterson spent twenty-nine years of his ministry as pastor of a church in suburban Baltimore, Maryland, a congregation which he began serving as organizing pastor when it was but a “New Church Development” dream.

He has written numerous books, and also served as a professor at Regent University in Vancouver, BC. When asked what has astounded him most when, as a 79 year-old he reflects on his life, he replied that it the amazing hunger people still have in this post-modern age to read the Scriptures in languages which they can understand. He speaks with authority, as he spent years translating both the Old and New Testament into a translation titled “The Message.”

This humble servant, who lives in retirement in a cabin on Flathead Lake that he first helped his father build while still a young man, reports that he can barely comprehend that eleven million people have purchased copies of this translation – now re-translated by others into multiple languages – into which he so willingly dedicated countless hours of his already busy life.

It is not a mystery – to me at least – that we hunger to hear how much God loves us, and how good and gracious God is.

It is a mystery, however, to come to terms with the reality that the Scriptures don't just tell us how good God is, but also how sinful and rebellious we humans are.

In his commentary on today's text, Whitworth University Emeritus Professor Dale Bruner puts it this way:

If the main theme of the gospel of God is the love of God, the subtheme is humanity's rebellious response to this love. What heightens the enormity of this subtheme of sin is that humanity's most privileged representatives – the people of God – resist God's love.¹

Ouch! Like rebellious children, we seem to like the perks of living in the kingdom of God, but we chafe at the "house rules."

But this doesn't surprise me – not really – because I hear about it all the time; I hear about it that is from people who tell me why they don't attend church (this one or any one) anymore.

- ▶ It is not that they don't believe in God.
- ▶ It is not that they don't believe in Jesus.
- ▶ Is it not that they don't need love, otherwise why would they be talking to me as a minister, for heaven's sake?

It is because of the ways they've been wounded in the context of a particular church or, in some cases, in several congregations.

A few say it's because the church – any church – is filled with hypocrites, but that's a lame excuse. Hypocrites are everywhere, but it doesn't keep us from going to other places which such folk frequent.

The story of humanity vis-a-vis God and righteousness is not pretty, but it is nothing new.

Take for example the reason this story about the absentee landlord would have been so abrasive to the religious people of Jesus' day. It is because they would have recognized its parallels in the Hebrew Scriptures' Book of the Prophet Isaiah.

Here's what we read in that context about another landowner who also was clearly

¹ Frederick Dale Bruner. Matthew: A Commentary, Volume 2, "The Churchbook".

meant to be an image of God.

In Isaiah, Chapter 5, verses 1-7 reads as follows:

¹ I will sing for the one I love - a song about his vineyard: My loved one had a vineyard on a fertile hillside. ² He dug it up and cleared it of stones and planted it with the choicest vines. He built a watchtower in it and cut out a winepress as well. Then he looked for a crop of good grapes, but it yielded only bad fruit. ³ "Now you dwellers in Jerusalem and people of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard. ⁴ What more could have been done for my vineyard than I have done for it? When I looked for good grapes, why did it yield only bad? ⁵ Now I will tell you what I am going to do to my vineyard: I will take away its hedge, and it will be destroyed; I will break down its wall, and it will be trampled. ⁶ I will make it a wasteland, neither pruned nor cultivated, and briers and thorns will grow there. I will command the clouds not to rain on it." ⁷ The vineyard of the LORD Almighty is the nation of Israel, and the people of Judah are the vines he delighted in. And he looked for justice, but saw bloodshed; for righteousness, but heard cries of distress.

So, brothers and sisters in Christ, we are the heirs of a legacy of human sinfulness. That's the bad news.

The good news is that we worship a God who just can't seem to help Godself when it comes to continuing to hope that eventually there will be a faithful heir to the kingdom.

In verse 33 alone there are eight verbs in one sentence – six of which describe the activities of the landlord and start the parable impressively with one of its main themes, the deeply caring love of God.

In verses 34-36 the "two sendings" of servants to collect what the landowner is due, teach us the patient love of God.

I often am asked why God has allowed such and such a tragedy to occur.

This passage helps me remember to reply related to the nature of the God revealed in the Bible – who is a God who has carefully prepared a garden – Eden – where first humans unsurprisingly are represented as being rebellious.

In much of scripture we are informed that it is part of God's goodness to entrust what He has faithfully prepared to people He has created and chosen to tend to His creation.

Scripture clearly expresses – with but a few exceptions – that God entrusts the work of God to humans, rather than to angels or spirits, but to folk such as you and me.

But it also states that those designated to remind humanity of God's expectations – namely prophets, and even God's own Son – are roughed up or killed.

Most of us recoil at over-the-top images of tenant farmers who kill whomever God sends and still expect to inherit the kingdom of God.

But let's consider a bit more the concept that God expects God's people to produce good fruit.

The professor, writer, and evangelist Tony Campolo tells a chilling story in this regard. It goes as follows:

This is the story of a great oil refinery. This refinery was huge. It employed all the modern techniques of chemical engineering. It was an impressive structure that was very well kept up. The interior was bright and shining. The workers were proud to be part of such a company. They made sure that the plant was clean and everything was in perfect working order. In fact the oil refinery soon gained a world-wide reputation. One day, some visitors asked to have a tour of the oil refinery. There was a reluctance at first to allow any guests. The visitors insisted. They had traveled a distance and wanted to tour the facility. The plant manager contacted his boss who reluctantly gave permission for the visitors to tour the plant.

The visitors walked through the vast chambers where they saw the processing petroleum, the gleaming pipes that carried the petroleum products from place to place, and the extensive organizational system that had been set in place to keep the refinery going. The visitors were impressed. Near the close one of them asked the guide if they might be permitted to see the shipping department. "What shipping department?" asked the guide clearly confused.

"Why, the shipping department from whence you ship out all the gasoline and oil you process here," said the tourists. "We don't have any shipping department," answered the guide. "You see, all the energy products produced in this refinery are used up keeping the refinery going."

Could the story of the refinery be about Christ's Church? Is all our energy in mainline congregations today used up just keeping the church afloat?

Could it be that we are no better than Jesus' enemies? Could it be that we, too, confuse our mission with comfort and ease? Would Christ receive the same reception here that he received there?

That's the uncomfortable question we face as contemporary "Tenant farmers in God's Vineyard."

Amen.