

The Wicked Husbandmen

Mtt.21:33-46, Exodus20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20, Philippians 3:4b-14

The scripture readings for today were taken from the suggestions in the lectionary. However, as I read the lectionary scriptures this week, I began to see them with new eyes. In particular, as I read Matthew 21, the Parable of the Wicked Husbandmen (in the King James Version), I began to understand the parable from the perspective of the financial crisis we find ourselves in here in the United States. The husbandmen have nothing to do with “husbands” as we use the term today. So, husbands, don’t feel offended.

An ancient Greek philosopher, Protagoras (490-420 BC) said, “Man is the measure of all things. On the other hand, David asked, “What is man that You (God) are mindful of him, the son of man that You care for him?” (Psalm 8:4). Here are two kinds of philosophies about man. We really mean “human beings,” both men and women, so ladies, don’t feel excluded! The one philosophy claims that human beings are the center of all things,” while the other philosophy holds that “God is the center all things.” These two philosophies are quite opposite in their center and direction, and in their interpretation of human life. Therefore, what kind of philosophy we choose for our lives dictates which direction we go in our lives. Our concern today is not only “who are we?” but also “who is the God caring for us?”

Before going further into an explanation of the scripture lessons, I would like to share two stories in relation to the Bible story, the Parable of the Wicked Husbandmen.

The first story is about a bank robber. Jose Rodriguez was a bank robber. He lived in Mexico in the golden days of the west. Jose would slip across the border into Texas, rob some banks, and then flee back into Mexico. One day, a Texas Ranger caught up with Jose in a saloon. The Ranger put a gun to the robber’s head and said, “Rodriguez, I know who you are, and if you don’t give back all that money you stole from the Texas banks, I’m gonna blow your head off!”

But, there was a problem. Jose could not understand English, and the Ranger could not speak Spanish. However, a young boy standing nearby overheard the conversation. He said, “I will translate.” The Ranger said, “O.K. You tell him that if he doesn’t give all that money back, I’m gonna blow his head off.” The boy spoke to Jose, and Jose began to shake with fear. In Spanish, he cried out, “Don’t shoot. I will tell you. No one else in the world knows where the money is. Go to the well at the north end of town. Remove the fifth brick on the far side, and there you will find the money. Don’t shoot!”

Can you guess what the boy said to the Ranger in English? The boy turned to the Texas Ranger and said in English: “Jose Rodriguez is a very brave man. He dares you to shoot!” Who has the money after all?

The second story goes like this. There was a rural village which made up a community. In that village, there was a wealthy business man who had contributed to this community in many ways. He seemed a healthy and strong man when others saw him. But, since he

ate a lot but did not exercised for long time, he was getting weaker and weaker. One day he was ambulated to a hospital and diagnosed with a critical illness which needed a special injection to treat it. The injection was so expensive that it could not be covered by his insurance. And, they didn't know what kind of injection it was; whether it was a kind of morphine or pain-killer, or whether it was a remedy of sorts.

The man and his family were not able to pay the medical bill if he had to have that injection. The man had many members in his family he needed to support. If the man would fail the whole, large family, this would result in a big disaster and also a big loss for the community. So, a group of representative of this village came together at a meeting and discussed the matter. The problem was the cost of the injection. The cost was too much, a couple of million dollars, for the family. The group of village representatives was asked to help with the medical bill, but that meant the bill would be distributed among all of the people of the village. The issue was serious and as big as any discussion that had been debated in that village up to that time.

This story is a parable about the problem of the financial crisis in United States today. Lehman Brothers Investment Bank was bankrupted. As you may well know, the bankruptcy of Lehman Brothers Investment Bank began the recent hurricane of the stock market on Wall Street, which has so far seen the fall of many of the giants of investment banks in the U.S. The South Korean government, for one, invested \$1.2 billion of its retirement fund for its people, which has been controlled by the Korean government, in stock with the Lehman Bothers Investment Bank.

Wall Street is facing a potential collapse. The cause of this global economic crisis is under consideration. A \$700 billion bailout plan is currently being debated by congress now. We don't know how and when the economy of United States will be settled.

Wall Street, the stock market, is the symbol of American Capitalism. If Wall Street falls, the economy of United States will likely collapse. The United States today doesn't have much by way of a production industry. American made cars are having a hard time competing for business in other countries. Most of the goods in the United States market today are, in fact, made in foreign countries. Live stock, such as beef, and agricultural products such as rice, corn, and pork are exports items. However, the balance of trade in the export production industry does not remain in our favor.

It may be that the strongest industry in America is the stock market, the money market. To loan and invest are the business of the banks of the United States. That is the mode of capitalism. So, what's is the problem in the United States economy? Let's take a look the scripture, the story of the wicked husbandmen.

I see and interpret the vineyard in the story, walled around, built with a watchtower and rented, as the Wall Street of today. Wall Street problems tell us that the owner's money was lost not by the owner, but by the money caretaker. The same problem is raised in the Bible. The image of the vineyard applies not only to Wall Street, but also to our life as

steward. This parable is probably addressed not only to Jewish rulers, but to the crowds in the Temple courts, not excluding the rulers.

Historically, the parable of the wicked husbandmen is a metaphorical story: the landowner is God, the vineyard Israel, the tenants the leaders of the nation, the servants the prophets, and the son is Jesus Messiah. But today's interpretation, in my point of view, is wider than this. This parable is to be applied in the here and now, in our own life situation. I see three components in the scripture message that lead us to take a serious look in our own Christian lives.

The first component is the duty of the faithful husbandmen to pay rent in the form of fruits harvested in Chapter 21, verse 34. This is an old theme with new variation. (Isaiah 5:1-7 and Psalm 80:6-16.) The plans and work of the landowner show his care for the vineyard. He builds a wall to keep out animals, a watchtower to guard against thieves and fire, and digs a winepress to squeeze the grapes right there. All this shows his confidence that his vineyard will bear fruit. The tenant farmers are to take care of the vineyard during the owner's absence and pay rent in kind. The "servants" are the owner's agents "to collect his fruit." The owner asked his tenants to pay the rent in the form of the fruits harvested from their labor.

"The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism" written by Max Weber, a German socialist said, "For monetary gain was not to be used for luxury or self-indulgent bodily comfort, but rather was to be saved, and accumulated for which is the steward's obligation toward his owner, God." That was the spirit of Capitalism when it started in the 17th century in Europe.

If Wall Street were the means of this kind of Capitalism, which at least according to the Protestant work ethic, God allows, some portion of its profits should be designated as "fruit" to be offered for the purpose of God's work in our world. But, there is no such spirit in the business of the Wall Street or of the Investment Banks. Where is your fruit to be offered when the Lord ask us for our "rent" which we are to pay as servants of God?

The second component of the message of the parable of the wicked husbandmen is "the stone" of the builder in verse 42. "The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone." The capstone implied the church, the believer of Christ. In Matthew 21:44, the symbolism of the "stone" was the church. While the building metaphor makes no explicit allusion to the church, but it does imply the works of the unbelievers of the Son.

After the owner's son died, the wicked husbandmen thought that they had triumphed and that everything was finished according to their will. But, the history of God is not to be finished that way. God continues His history by transforming the cornerstone into the capstone.

I Peter 2:4-8: "As you come to him, the living Stone—rejected by men but chosen by God and precious to him—you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual

house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.”

You and I are the capstone of the house of the Lord who is to take care of His continuing history. Even if Wall Street should fall, the work of God will be continued by the people who trust in him, the precious cornerstone of the history of God working it the world.

St. Peter said; “See, I lay a stone in Zion, a chosen and precious cornerstone, and the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame.” “The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone.” (1 Peter 2:6)

The third component of the message lies in the phrase in the scripture, “taken away from you and given to others.” Adam Smith, the father of economics, according to his “Game Theory” said. “All sorts of phenomena in economy are controlled by the ‘invisible hand.’” Smith was profoundly religious, and saw “the invisible hand” as the mechanism by which a benevolent God administered a universe in which human happiness was maximized.

But, the leaders failed so badly in handling God’s “vineyard” and rejecting God’s Son that God gave the responsibility to another people who would produce the kingdom’s fruit. The wicked husbandmen intended the vineyard, given to them for stewardship, to be made for their own, ownership. Referring to the husbandmen who intended to take over the landowner’s vineyard, the master says, “Take this away from them and give this to others.” The message is clear: Fail to use appropriately what you’ve been given, and you’ll lose it.

Dr. Harry Emerson Fosdick, former pastor of Riverside Church in New York City, told a fascinating story one day about a vulture which was frozen and ultimately destroyed by his own appetites. It was a wintry day on the Niagara River below Buffalo, New York. This vulture (a bird of prey) had lighted on a carcass floating down the river, and he began to feed. He intended to feed on the carcass as long as he could and then to depart just before the rapid broke. He planned to feed right up to the last second, until just before the falls, and then break away and fly to safety into the sky. But, something happened that the vulture hadn’t counted on. He moved swiftly toward the escape—but he couldn’t. He could not get way because he was stuck to the carcass he was feeding upon, and he was plunged over the falls to his death. He meant to break free at the last moment, but his talons were frozen on its prey. He was captured and destroyed by the clutch of his own claws! This is a metaphor of tragedy among those who invested in stock with the falling Wall Street today.

The lessons from the Scripture and Wall Street are that God who is owner of all things is asking for fruits to be offered; and God moves and transforms stones through invisible hand by taking away and giving into; God makes us the capstone of the house of the Lord who is to take care of His continuing history.

Don’t forget that you and I are the stewards of God who trust in Him and whose life will never be put to shame.