

Title: The Parable of the Landowner and the Vineyard

Subtitle: Knowing Christ: The Greatest Ambition

Video URL: <https://youtu.be/GBW3UAjk4b8>

I like how The Rev. Amy Richter, an Anglican priest from Quebec, Canada, used puns to introduce our parable today. She starts with silly things like: *Why do cows have bells? Because their horns don't work. How does Moses make his coffee? Hebrews it. Need an ark? I Noah guy.*

Amy says that what makes puns work is that they compel us to make new connections. Then there is the moment that we get it, and we giggle or groan, like: *Why did Noah punish the chickens on the ark? They were using fowl language.*

Such puns make us think about words differently. And the parables that Jesus told also make us think about the world and ourselves in a new way. When he told the Parable of the Vineyard that was read today, he shared it to upend the religious leaders' assumptions. They thought and acted as if they controlled and owned all that went on at the temple. They coveted the power and prestige of being in charge.

But the parable is also for us. It shows us that one day, all of us will have to give an account of what we have done with the gifts and talents entrusted to us.

When God begins to work in our lives and introduce his kingdom to us, there are many assumptions we carry that need changing.

When Paul addresses the Philippians in our New Testament lesson today, he begins by sharing his personal background and history. Along with this, he shares some ways his thinking needed to

The Rev. Stephen Becker; Proper 22 YrA 2023 Sermon, Matthew 21:33-46; Phil. 3:4b-14; Ps 80; Isaiah 5:1-7
be changed. At one time, Paul put great confidence in his religious pedigree and accomplishments based on his strict adherence to Jewish laws. But now he admits, ***“Whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.”***¹ Now, those things he once took great pride in are considered rubbish compared to knowing Christ. Now, he says he wants to be ***“found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ.”***² This desire is expressed poetically in a hymn written by Edward Mote, and inspired by a visit he had with a dying woman.

*My hope is built on nothing less
Than Jesus' blood and righteousness
I dare not trust the sweetest frame
But wholly lean on Jesus' name.*

*On Christ, the solid rock, I stand;
All other ground is sinking sand.
All other ground is sinking sand.³*

But putting our hope in Christ is just the beginning. There is a story about a little boy who fell out of bed, and his mother asked how it happened. He replied, “I stayed too near where I got in.” That’s exactly how it is with many people in their spiritual experience. Satisfied that their sins are forgiven, and their reservations for heaven have been confirmed, they stay “where they got in.”⁴ But that is not how it was with Paul.

¹ Philippians 3:7-8

² Philippians 3:9

³ Edward Mote, Hymn, “My Hope is Built on Nothing Less”

⁴ Story told by Stuart Briscoe, *Bound for Joy*, p. 109

Paul could never be accused of settling for where he got in! His life was revolutionized by his desire to grow in the grace and knowledge of God. He says, *“I want to know Christ—to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death.”*⁵ This living, dynamic relationship with Christ that Paul describes is what he longed to experience, but the path toward it is not all sweetness and light. Suffering is somehow intermixed with it.

In my own experience, joining with others in their suffering is where I have gotten to know people in ways that went beyond the surface of things. It is one of the reasons the hospice chaplaincy was one of the most fulfilling ministries I ever had. It afforded me the privilege of being with people in the most heartbreakingly moments of their lives as they said their goodbyes to spouses and family members. In such moments, they told stories as tears rolled down their faces. Then, in a single moment, they went from tears to laughter as they shared cherished memories. They made me feel as if I was standing on holy ground with them.

Similarly, when we share in Christ’s sufferings, we share in something very sacred. Difficulties and hardships have driven me to know Christ better. They have given me a hunger to study God’s word and driven me to find the strength and encouragement to put his words into action. Jesus said, “If you abide in my word (and hold to my teaching), you are truly my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”⁶ Then when tribulations and hardships come our way, they do not detour us but motivate us, for

⁵ Philippians 3:10

⁶ John 8:31-32

“in all these things, we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.”⁷

As we look at these great and precious promises through the light of the parable of the landowner and the vineyard, we must be mindful of how we, too, treat the stewardship of God’s gifts. It brings us all to a point of decision. Namely, will we acknowledge that God has called and chosen us to bear fruit? Will we work, pray, and give to build up his kingdom? And will we allow his word to change how we think and act?

Admittedly, this is a daunting task. Even the Apostle Paul never thought he had arrived at such spiritual maturity. Yet he willingly acknowledged, **“Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.”⁸**

The call of God on each of us requires an all-out effort that involves straining, stretching, and reaching toward the goal of our heavenly calling. God has taken hold of us so that we might bear much fruit. So, let’s make God’s aim for us our aim and shoot for nothing less. Then, one day, we **“will receive the crown of life, which the Lord has promised to those who love him.”⁹** Amen.

⁷ Romans 8:31

⁸ Philippians 3:12-14

⁹ James 1:12