

Sermon for Sunday, October 5, 2008

The Twenty-First Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 22)

By JoAnn Taylor

First Lesson	Exodus 20:1-14
Psalm	Psalm 19
Second Lesson	Philippians 3:4b-14
Gospel	Matthew 21:33-46

All praise and glory to thee, O Lord – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – now and for ever. Amen.

Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One. The Sh'ma Yisra'el is the first principle and basic tenet of the Jewish faith. It is the concise creed that sums up their belief in one God, the rejection of all idols, and is recited 4 times daily by devout Jews. {pause} This morning's readings begin with a basic rule or tenet of both Judaism and Christianity – the Ten Commandments. Exodus today begins with: I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt, where you were slaves. You shall have no other gods but me. Do not make for yourself any graven image of anything in heaven above or on the earth or beneath the seas. God is telling us that HE is the Lord our God and that HE will tolerate no rivals for HE is a jealous God.The words are different, but both the Commandments and the Sh'ma share the same idea – God is supreme and nothing should come before Him.

Let's take a closer look at our reading from Exodus – the Ten Commandments:

{pause}

And God spoke these words.....In the ancient Near East, 'words' often referred to the stipulations of a treaty or covenant between two nations or people. Israel's basic divine law – the Ten Commandments – is written in the form of a formal royal treaty. The preamble begins with the king identifying himself – in this case – 'I am the Lord your God'. Then follows a historical prologue – a list of gracious or merciful acts towards the subject nation or king – 'who brought you out of Egypt, where you were slaves.' The prologue is followed by the treaty stipulations – the words or commandments – that the 'king' (God) wants us to live by and obey. There are 10 – and the first one is 'You shall have no other gods but me.' Simple direct and to the point – God is number one – period – and we are to accept His complete and total control of our lives. No other deity or idol - of any kind - is to be allowed to rival the one, true God. The next four continue to expand on this theme ending with number 5 – Honor your Father and your Mother, so that you may live long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you. This 5th Commandment is the only one that contains a promise. Commandments 6 thru 10 are the commandments that dictate how God wants us to live with each other – remember, Paul said, "Love can do no harm to a neighbor" – in short, we should not lie, murder, steal, commit adultery, or covet what is not ours. These, too, are pretty straight forward – not difficult to understand – but apparently, they are extremely difficult to obey. [pause] Thousands of years after the people received the Ten Commandments, Jesus gave the people a new covenant – a new Great Commandment – that summed up the heart of the Ten Commandments – but was softer. It still covered the same tenets – but it wasn't quite so 'in your face'. The Great Commandment is actually the full text of the Sh'ma Yisra'el. Deuteronomy 6:4 says, 'Hear, O Israel, the Lord your God, the Lord is One. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart,

with all your soul and with all your strength.’ Jesus then adds, ‘And you shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ This then was the summary of all the law and the prophets.

[pause]

Today’s Gospel tells us about God. This parable reads like an allegory – instead of having just one main point and not stressing the details of the story, we must listen for the point and the meaning in the details. Normally, Jesus would not teach in this manner, but his particular reading is straight to the point – God is displeased with the Jewish leaders. Let’s look at the hidden meaning behind this parable: The vineyard is the house of Israel; the owner is God; the tenants are the Jews; the first group of servants represent the early Old Testament prophets; the second group of servants is much larger and represents the later group of Old Testament prophets; the other tenants represent the Gentiles- by the 2nd century the fledgling church was almost exclusively Gentiles; and of course, we know that the son and heir represents Jesus. The winepress consisted of two troughs – one higher than the other – so that when the grapes were crushed the juice would flow down through the channels into the lower trough. The watch tower served two purposes – while the grapes were growing and ripening, it was a place from which one could guard the vineyard; when the harvest was under way, it served as sleeping quarters for the hired hands. The actions of the landowner were not out of the ordinary – Israel in Jesus’ time was not a place of great wealth, luxury or comfort – it was common practice for wealthy landowners to live in another country while trusted stewards or tenants oversaw the business. Those workers bringing in the harvest represent the religious leaders of Israel – the ones to whom God entrusted his ‘vineyard’. The actions of the tenants were not uncommon given the economic unrest of the period – and it was not out of the question that they might attempt to kill the son in order to keep the wealthy lands they were tending. Everything about the parable exhibits the common day to day business practices of that time. However, the Pharisees understood that Jesus was condemning them for their actions – for their rejection of the Old Testament prophets and law. Their cynical response caused Jesus to take his case directly to the people – and the Pharisees chose not to move against him because they feared the crowd would protect their young rabbi and prophet. They knew that Jesus was plainly holding them liable. The stone that the builders had rejected would become the capstone for a church that would bear fruit among the other tenants – the Gentiles. {pause} This parable was the turning point – up until now, the religious leaders tolerated Jesus and his ministry – they didn’t exert themselves to find a way to destroy him. But now - Now they did –they could no longer turn a blind eye to the implied rebellion against their authority – peaceful though it was.

[pause]

What else does this parable have to tell us? One might think that it has already said all that it can....but you’d be wrong. This parable still has a great deal to say – about God, about humanity, privilege and responsibility:

First, the parable speaks of God’s trust in us. We are the cultivators entrusted with God’s creation just as the ‘owner’ entrusted the tenants to care for his vineyard. God trusts us to do the tasks required of us so that his creation – our home – is well cared for. He doesn’t stand over us with a whip like a taskmaster – he gives us the free-will to handle things on our own. Second, the parable speaks of God’s patience with us. He sends messenger after messenger to us with his words and we repeatedly ignore, disavow, abuse and even kill those who come in his name. Even when God speaks to us in the still quiet of prayer, we often refuse to recognize his voice calling to us – yet he is ever patient, ever merciful, eternally faithful and always loving towards us. God never fails us... we fail him.

Third, it recognizes that even when one has infinite patience, if a task needs doing – if lands need caring for - then one must find others more receptive to the task at hand. God, in this instance, is forced to step in and remove the current tenants from his vineyard. He then turns

the lands over to new tenants who will care for the property and pay the rents due. Human freedom is part of the equation since God allocates the task to us and then lets us do the work without dictating every step we take. The parable talks about the fact that we are always answerable to God for our actions or lack thereof - the premeditated murder of the son and heir, the violence against the servant/messengers, the stealing of the rents and property due the master – are all sins that we are held accountable for. We are guilty of sin each time we deliberately stray from the path which God has chosen for us.

Then the parable tells us about Jesus. Here, two things should be uppermost in your mind – one is that Jesus is lifting himself clear of the succession of prophets and acknowledging his role as the Son of God; and two.....he is not unaware of his impending death on the cross. He will go fully aware to his death and he knows exactly why and for whom he will die.

[pause]

Finally, the stone that the builders rejected will become the capstone.....he who falls against it will be broken to pieces, but if the stone falls on him, he will be crushed. The stone of course is Jesus. He was rejected by his people and he will be turned over to be crucified by them – but here the person who ‘falls against the stone’ is the one who answers God’s call. The journey tests us until it breaks us, then Jesus takes the pieces of shattered clay and restores the ‘vessel’. The restored vessel will be stronger – but it will also be more pliable to the master’s guiding hands. The one who is crushed by the stone is the person who fails to step out in faith and answer God’s call or works against those who are working for God. In either case, the result is like having the ‘life’ crushed out of you – or being removed from the life-giving force of the Holy Spirit.

[pause]

The analogy of this parable speaks clearly to us here at Incarnation. The gist of today’s readings is to teach us how we should live our lives with God, with each other and how to be good stewards of his creation. There are many good things happening here – people are becoming more actively involved; the Clothes Closet is a booming ministry that is fast outgrowing its space in the undercroft; we’ve resurrected the Daughters of the King and we have a men’s guild flourishing as ‘Andy’s Bunch’; many outside organizations use our facilities and there is more taking place all the time. But, there’s always a but, the fact is that even with all that is taking place, there is so much more that could be happening. There are many ways to serve – Choir, Altar Guild, Godly Play, Bible Studies, Lay Readers and Acolytes, the Sexton’s job, Hospital Visitors, and the list could go on and on and on. Next Sunday, is Rally Sunday and it’s an opportunity for those of us who are involved to pass along information about what we do, who we are - to try and recruit more help. The Holy Spirit is trying to sweep through this church; it’s trying to bring new ideas for growth and change can begin to take root. The changes are taking place – but they can’t continue to without our help. Each of us must provide an open conduit for the spirit to move and work – only then will we see the fruits of the Spirit come alive within this church. God wants us to produce good fruit – to be good stewards of his creation – to be his hands here on earth. If we don’t produce the fruit God wants us to, he will remove us from his vineyard and find other tenants to carry out his work.

{pause}

We all have talents and skills that can be used or passed on to others through the works available to us in this church or diocese. Remember the words of Henry Van Dyke the next time someone asks you to help and you don’t think you have anything to offer: “Use what talents you possess – the woods would be very silent if no birds sang there except those that sang best.” Amen.