

Grace and peace to you my friends and fellow sojourners from Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior.

There are ten Jesus parables that are **unique** to the Gospel of Matthew. In the last thirteen weeks we have had nine of these parables. The tenth one will be in four weeks, the day Father Chris Golding will be preaching for me. I will be here but will have been off island for the critical time for my homily preparation. Father Chris is the chaplain at Seabury. His wife Julia and kids Phoebe and James attend here on a regular basis and Chris does, as well, when he is not preaching elsewhere.

Last week's parable of the wicked tenants is not one of Matthew's unique parables but **today's** parable is. Last week's was a hard one to preach on which is probably why I did not actually say very much about that parable at all. A problem that surfaces regularly for pastors who choose to kind of skip over a difficult passage is that the next week's passage might be even more difficult. That, my friends, is the case in spades today.

I can, however, point out a context that is actually the reason these two parables are so difficult and why they are tied together in many ways. First, in these two parables we are able to catch a glimpse of an intense **family** feud that is troubling Matthew. Notice, I used the word **family** because that is very important. I would also suspect that almost everyone here has most likely experienced some kind of family feud. They are difficult and they are usually not very fun. We must first remember that Matthew, his readers, and his community, are all Israelites. They are in a **struggle** with their Israelite **kin** about how to be faithful to the God of Abraham and Sarah, and, in particular, whether Jesus is the **Messiah** Israel's prophets had promised. This is **not** a Jewish-Christian dispute but rather, it represents the pain of a community broken away and separated from its family even while it is still trying to establish both its identity and its reason for existing. The struggle is real on so many levels. Does this sound like the cultural, educational, political, and religious struggles we often experience in our own communities, families and society?

The question this parable raises for our consideration is **what** do we do when people we love do not believe as we do? Are our choices really limited to either condemning those who believe differently or do not believe at all, **or** feeling like we somehow are not being faithful by **not** condemning them? But **we** are not Matthew's community, a minority tradition with little cultural power. This, my friends, is what I think our society has currently come to. You are either with us or you are against us. There is no longer simple toleration and understanding for those who act and believe differently from how we act and believe. This is to me a **form** of greed and selfishness. It lacks concern and love for, and service to others. It may **also** be an indication of **lack** of trust in God's love and promises.

For the last nine months, I believe you can say that I have returned over and over again to several key aspects of my theology. First, one can prove any theological or semi-theological premise with the Bible. Second, how we interpret and read scripture is entirely based on our biases, lenses, and preconceptions. In other words, if we believe God is angry and judgmental then that is the God we will find in scripture. On the other hand, if we believe God is loving, merciful and inclusive then that is the God we will find in scripture. One is based on the law and the other is based on grace.

Third, everything that happens around and to us in life has at least two sides, perspectives, or views. Fourth, I believe the Old Testament or covenant is based on law. I also believe Jesus brings to us a New Testament or covenant that is based on grace, love, mercy and service. There are numerous signs given by God in the Old Testament to reinforce God's covenant with Israel, Abraham's descendants including the rainbow after the flood. There are also numerous signs of the new covenant in the New Testament, but the acts or signs for me that embody the heart and soul of the new and expanded covenant that God makes with **all** humans are the cross and the resurrection.

David Lose suggested this week that we should try trusting God enough for us to **resist** condemnation. That we do not **have** to call down God's judgment but rather we **trust** that God does, in fact, have a plan so that when the time is right those we love will respond to God's **gracious** invitation. Our function is to love and serve and not to **worry** as Paul says today - about **anything**.

Three of our four readings have a very Lutheran connection. Anyone care to hazard a guess? Well food, of course. Banquets, dinners, potlucks. Lavish settings and lots of lavish and rich food. Sounds like a Lutheran potluck to me. Mostly good, healthy food although I am sure some not so healthy food is also present and available. I mean, after all, this meal is inclusive and that, my friends, is probably one the three most important aspects of these texts. First, God is the host, the inviter, and the provider. Second, the meal is lavish and beyond our wildest expectations. Finally, **all** are invited to enjoy the abundance in these meals. The meals in our readings today and many other meals throughout the Bible are all **precursors** for the most important meal of all. The meal we share each week, known as communion or the Eucharist. It is a meal once again where God **is** the host, the inviter, and the provider. It is also a meal open to all that **all** may know God's forgiveness, love, mercy and power in their lives. Finally, it is a meal with a new level of intimacy between God and humanity.

I am typically a pretty calm, laid back individual. Sometimes, however, the antics of those around me can cause me to lose control, to over react, to **even**, although not often, become aggressive. I think the same thing is true for God and especially for Jesus. After all, Jesus was both divine and human. I am pretty sure that some of **our** antics get to them as well.

Hear then the good news:

The cross and resurrection are what change our relationship with God from the Old Testament, the law, to the New Testament, grace and mercy.

Paul says in verse 5 of our reading from Philippians today that we should "**Let our gentleness be known to everyone.**"

Curtis Thompson in his "God Pause" devotional this week said this about gentleness: "To be gentle is to be open to life, ready to listen and respond to others. Gentle souls take the other seriously, place themselves in the other's shoes, and anticipate the effects words and actions have on the other."

Thomas Merton said: "To be risen with Christ means not only that one has a choice and that one may live by a **higher** law - the law of grace and love - but that one must do so. The first obligation of the Christian is to maintain their freedom from all superstitions, all blind taboos and religious formalities, indeed from all **empty** forms of legalism."

Thomas Merton also said: "Our job is to love others without stopping to inquire whether or not they are **worthy**. That is not our business and, in fact, it is **nobody's** business. What we are asked to do is to love, and this love **itself** will render both ourselves and our neighbors worthy if anything can."

That is what it means to be gentle, to love as a believer ought.

The hymn in the "God Pause" for this week is "Be Thou My Vision" which always makes me think of another great hymn "Turn Your Eyes Upon Jesus."

God and Jesus should always be our **focus** - then we can be at peace **and** rejoicing.

Grace and peace to you, my friends. Be gentle.

Amen