

Jim Gill

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"Foundation"

Exodus 20:1-20 Matthew 21:33-46 Philippians 3:4-14

INTRODUCTION TO EXODUS 20:1-20

We've been wandering through the wilderness with Moses these last few Sundays. The crowd Moses is leading has complained about lack of food and water, which God miraculously provided. Now Moses goes up on Mount Sinai to be with God and receives God's next provision-words set in stone to provide a guide for how they will survive and thrive after slavery.

INTRODUCTION TO MATTHEW 21:33-46

Last week we looked at a parable about two sons, one who refused to work in the vineyard and then changed his mind and did, and the other who agreed to do so and didn't. This morning's parable is one of outright rebellion that involves more than going or not going to the fields. Hear the word of God from Matthew 21:33-46

Let us pray. Dear Lord, we marvel that you came to bring God's love to the world and yet were despised, rejected, and killed. We rejoice that you rose again and are reigning over us now. Help us to recognize where our allegiance lies, and to whom we belong. As we think of this your word may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight O Lord our Rock and our Redeemer.

Once, at a congregational meeting a wealthy member of the church rose to tell the rest of those present about his Christian faith. He said, "I'm a millionaire, and I attribute my wealth to the blessings of God in my life." He went on to recall the turning point in his relationship with God. As a young man, he had just earned his first dollar and he went to a church meeting that night. The speaker at that meeting was a missionary who told about his work in the mission field. Before the offering plate was passed around, the preacher told everyone that everything that was collected that night would be given to this missionary to help fund his work on behalf of the church. The wealthy man wanted to give to support mission work, but he knew he couldn't make change from the offering plate. He knew he either had to give all he had or nothing at all. At that moment, he decided to give that dollar even though it was all he had. Looking back, he said he knew that God had blessed that decision and had made him wealthy.

When he finished, there was silence in the room. As he returned to the pew and sat down, an elderly lady seated behind him leaned forward and said, "I dare you to do it again."

When we start out, it's easy to remember that the gifts and opportunities that come our way are from God. But something happens along the way. We forget

who the owner is. We come to think of the vineyard and everything it produces as something we own. We tend to think that everything we are able to purchase because we have worked and earned the money to buy it is something we own.

The tenants of the vineyard in the parable Jesus sets before us today didn't own the vineyard they were working in, nor did they own the fruit it produced.. They didn't pay any purchase price, they only paid rent. And the rent they agreed to pay was a portion of the harvest.

This is the obligation the renters in this story had agreed upon with the owner of the vineyard. But when the owner sent agents to collect the rent, the renters refused to pay what they owed. Instead they said to each other, "Why should we give HIM anything? WE'RE the ones doing all the work around here! Did he offer to help with the harvest? NO! And since we're doing all the work, this should be OUR vineyard, not HIS! And if it's OUR vineyard, the harvest belongs to us, too!" Then they proceeded not only to deny the owner the rent they had agreed upon, but also to mistreat and kill the ones the owner had sent to collect the rent. The tenants of the vineyard took for their own something that rightfully belonged to someone else.

I read about a church that was located next door to a supermarket. Since the church was short on parking spaces and the supermarket was closed on Sundays, (this was a long time ago before the blue laws were repealed) the church leaders asked the owner of the supermarket for permission to park in his lot. The owner's response was "Fine. You are welcome to use it 51 weeks a year." "What about the other week?" the church members asked. "That week," said the owner of the market, "I'll chain off the lot so you will always remember that the lot belongs to me, and not to the church.

God will judge us one day by how faithfully we have ministered to one another in His name and how we have ministered to those in our community and in this world that belongs to God.

Yesterday we were blessed to be able to be a blessing to folks from our church and our community who came for the Blessing of the Animals. In our service Garry Nelson read from the poem in Genesis where the creation of our fellow companions from the sky, sea and ground were created and God said, "It was good."

Some of the animals we blessed were "rescues." Some of the pets were purchased. But the humans are not owners-- they are partners in a relationship of caring. I was blessed to be able to pray a blessing on these pets and their caring companions. Even though I am allergic to cats I was able to bless them ... in their carriers.

We are tenants of this earth, stewards of what has been entrusted to our care—that includes our environment and all those with whom we share our world. We are also stewards of the church, entrusted with the awesome task of ministering to the needs of a broken and hurting world. It is our responsibility to take care of this church building, to keep it up ... but also to keep up with the people that make up this church fellowship—to pray for them and care for them and love one another. When I shared about the Blessing of the Animals service at the Rotary lunch last Wednesday I invited them to come to any of our 10:30 worship services where we have a Blessing of the Humans every week.

We also have a responsibility, a calling to reach out to others and to bring others into our church family to carry on the ministry and mission when we're gone....because one day we will be gone. How can we know how to care for one another? Is there a handbook for the care and feeding of humans?

We've been following Moses as he has led the children of God from slavery to freedom. On Mount Sinai God gave Moses Ten Commandments to help the people know what is expected of them. The first four tell them how to love and honor God and the last 6 tell them how to love each other and care for each other.

Understanding the Ten Commandments properly begins by noting that they are prefaced not by an order — "Here are ten rules. Obey them!" — but instead by a wonderful announcement of freedom: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery"(v. 2). We will probably always refer to the verses that follow as the "Ten Commandments," but we can also think of them as descriptions of the kind of life that is typical when we have been truly liberated. These are not really laws— they have no specific penalties attached for breaking them. In the Hebrew Bible, they are known simply as the Ten Words — God's words describing a way of life that guarantees, to coin a phrase, "liberty and justice for all." **1**

*David Wells writes about what happened on December 26, 1989. Romania was in turmoil. The previous day, President Nicolae Ceausescu, unable to quell the tide of dissent in Bucharest, had been tried and executed. Now no one was in charge. Western reporters flooded into the country from the south, searching for someone who could speak English. Finally they found someone, and in one sentence she summed up not only Romania's predicament, but the human condition: "We have freedom," she said, "but we don't know what to do with it." **2]***

The apostle Paul was a stickler for the law to the point of arresting those who he thought broke the laws by following Jesus. He even went so far as to consenting to the stoning of Stephen, one of Jesus' first deacons. On the road to Damascus in Syria Saul encountered the risen Jesus who called him from being so caught up in observing the letter of the law to following the law of love. Jesus freed him from being bound by the law to love. As we read this morning he said that he considered all of his religious rites were as nothing compared to knowing Jesus.

He discovered the true purpose of the law to help him know what to do with his freedom.

Jesus asked the religious officials what the owner of the vineyard would do to the rebellious tenants. They had no difficulty responding, "He will put those wretches to miserable death, and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the harvest time." Up to that point they still didn't know he was talking about them. They had been entrusted with the spiritual care of God's people. Unfortunately, many of them looked upon it only as a job--a way of earning a good living--a source of prestige and power. They were so set in their ways that they stoned the prophets who threatened their comfortable life and eventually would work towards killing God's own Son like the tenants in the parable...

Jesus ends his parable with a quote from Psalm 118 about the millstone becoming the capstone--about the stone that was rejected becoming the most important stone in the building God was erecting.

The corner stone was the key to the rest of the structure. The appropriate stone in size and shape would be placed strategically so that the rest of the building might take its alignment and form based on the corner stone. With this metaphor, the biblical writers established that the kingdom God built would be founded upon Jesus Christ. Every detail in its dimensions, shape, size, and form relates directed to Christ. 3

Jesus told those who were rejecting him that they were like the rebellious renters who killed God's prophets and would even kill God's son. He was warning them that unless they would repent and fulfill their calling to care for the people the verdict they pronounced on the rebellious renters in Jesus' parable would come to pass for them and the kingdom would be taken from them and given to those who WOULD do their job and give God what is due.

FINALLY, they understood he was talking about them. But did they repent? No, they started looking for a way to arrest him and do just what the parable said they would do, kill their owner's Son!

This is not our world, it is God's. This is not our church, it is God's. When we give to God and God's kingdom we are not being magnanimous. We are just giving God what is due. We are not doing anything about which we can boast. We are just acknowledging who is LORD, who is OUR LandLORD, and to whom WE belong. We are building upon the right foundation with Christ as our cornerstone.

I began my sermon with a story of a millionaire. I want to close with a story of the very first billionaire. The very first person to reach the status of billionaire was a man who knew how to set goals and follow through. At the age of 23, he had become a millionaire, by the age of 50 a billionaire. Every decision, attitude, and relationship was tailored to create his personal power and wealth. But three years later at the age of 53 he became ill.

His entire body became racked with pain and he lost all the hair on his head. In complete agony, the world's only billionaire could buy anything he wanted, but he could only digest milk and crackers. An associate wrote, "He could not sleep, would not smile and nothing in life meant anything to him." His personal, highly skilled physicians predicted he would die within a year.

That year passed agonizingly slow. As he approached death he awoke one morning with the vague remembrances of a dream. He could barely recall the dream but knew it had something to do with not being able to take any of his successes with him into the next world. The man who could control the business world suddenly realized he was not in control of his own life. He was left with a choice.

He called his attorneys, accountants, and managers and announced that he wanted to channel his assets to hospitals, research, and mission work. On that day John D. Rockefeller established his foundation. This new direction eventually led to the discovery of penicillin, cures for current strains of malaria, tuberculosis and diphtheria. The list of discoveries resulting from his choice is enormous.

But perhaps the most amazing part of Rockefeller's story is that the moment he began to give back a portion of all that he had earned, his body's chemistry was altered so significantly that he got better. It looked as if he would die at 53 but he lived to be 98.

Rockefeller learned gratitude and gave back from his wealth. Doing so made him whole. It is one thing to be healed. It is another to be made whole. **4.**

When John Rockefeller decided to give away what he knew he couldn't take with him he not only began a Foundation, he discovered the joy and fruit that comes from building on the right foundation.

Let's pray.

All good gifts come from our heavenly Father above. Lord thank you for the gifts you have so richly bestowed upon us. Thank you for the privilege of being entrusted with resources and may we exercise the best stewardship possible. You are a gracious God overflowing with loving kindness and mercy and we owe you so much. Receive our thanks and our dedication of the portion you ask us to return to you as a sign of our obedience and of our understanding that what we give is what we owe.

We continue to lift prayers for those in Puerto Rico who have been devastated by hurricane Maria, especially the family of our member Debby Duffy who survived but are facing daunting challenges. We pray for those in the path of Hurricane Nate and for relief and rescue efforts going on there. We pray for the survivors of the man-made disaster that occurred last Sunday night in Las Vegas where one person killed 58 others and wounded hundreds more. We pray for those in authority who have been elected to address these tragedies of Mother Nature and human nature to have the courage and wisdom to do so.

Hear our prayers for the people on our hearts and the concerns that we have this day.

Pour upon us the abundance of your mercy, forgiving us those things of which our conscience is afraid, and giving us those good things for which we are not worthy to ask, except through the merits and mediation of Jesus Christ our Savior;

- 1 CSS Publishing Company, Inc., Lectionary Tales for the Pulpit, by David E. Leininger
- 2 1. David F. Wells, "God Spoke These Words," *The Christian Century*, 3/15/00, p. 301.
- 3 The Cornerstone, by Phil Newton
- 4 ChristianGlobe Networks, Inc., ChristianGlobe Illustrations, by Brett Blair