

The Need for a Proper accounting – Matthew 21: 33-40
Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost, October 5, 2008
Calvary Lutheran Church, West Chester, PA + Pastor Roy Almquist

As we come to the final weeks of the Church Year, we invariably must deal with issues of responsibility and judgment. No one likes to be reminded that there will be a moment when we must justify how we have lived our lives and what we have done with the good things that were placed in our care. For most of us the concept of *constructive criticism* is an oxymoron. But the Bible is clear. At the end of time we will need to give a proper accounting for the stewardship of our lives.

We did not read the Old Testament lesson assigned for today, but it tells the story of another vineyard:

Let me sing for my beloved a love-song concerning his vineyard:
My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill.
He dug it and cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines;
He built a watchtower in the midst of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it;
He expected it to yield grapes, but it yielded *wild grapes*. [Isaiah 5: 1-2]

Isaiah's poem celebrates the importance of proper groundwork, good intentions, and the reality that things often do not turn out the way we hope. This is a lot like parenting. Most parents provide the best for their children -- good food, warm clothing, a secure home, enriching experiences, and the assurance that their children are loved. Like the keeper of the vineyard, we expect a rich yield as our children attain maturity.

But more often than not, something goes wrong. The harvest is disappointing. Children frequently emerge a lot like the *wild grapes* in Isaiah poem. The disobedient behavior and irresponsible actions of adolescence are generally transient, a part of growing up, but occasionally an estrangement develops between parent and child that is hard to overcome.

Our Gospel lesson for this morning, *The Parable of the Wicked Tenants*, is a story that goes beyond mild disappointment. It is a story of gross ingratitude and rebellion. And, while the story reminds us that God is a God of patience and trust, it also speaks directly of a judgment that is harsh but appropriate.

When we hear this parable, we quickly determine that the behavior of those wicked tenants was outrageous. How could they not understand the simple duty of honoring the owner of the vineyard, who had given them so much; why would they not simply pay the appropriate amount in appreciation for all they had received. But they did not.

What about us?

- Are we faithful stewards of all that is in our trust and care?
- Do we continually receive the blessings of life without ever acknowledging from where these blessings come?

We are alive at a time of unparalleled privilege and opportunity. Most of us live in comfortable homes. This nation, with its bountiful resources, has blessed us far beyond our deserving. Most of us have never had to endure warfare, hunger, or oppression. We are profoundly blessed. But how do we demonstrate our gratitude?

The financial crisis, that is threatening our nation and led to the unprecedented “rescue program” this past week, is not unrelated to the theme of our Gospel lesson. Many bright, capable individuals have been entrusted with the vineyards of banking, investments, real estate finance, pension funds, and other related trusts, for which they have been generously remunerated. But it would appear that a good salary is not adequate anymore. Greed drives otherwise moral people to make immoral decisions, violating the common trust. And many of us live in the hope that we will have a chance to play at this wonderful game called *get rich beyond your deserving!*

For many people today, including some who no doubt worship regularly at Calvary Lutheran Church, the real God in their lives is not the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, but *The Market* .. the source of wealth, power, and the promise of a comfortable future. Until recently many of the faithful have assigned to The Market a wisdom and omnipotence that we normally would only attributed to the God we know through Jesus. Paul Tillich once defined God as our Ultimate Concern. Well, for many that is The Market, the ultimate source of blessings, and the place where the First Commandment is always .. Thou shalt not say I have enough.

When I was a Bishop of the Lutheran Church one of my great joys was officiating at ordinations. After the laying on of hands at the critical moment and the placement of the stole around the neck, I would challenge the new pastor with these words: *This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. Moreover it is required of stewards that they be found trustworthy.* [I Corinthians 4: 1-2]

These words from First Corinthians came back to me as I meditated on our Gospel lesson this past week. They are not solely applicable to Pastors of the Church; I think they speak to all of us. We are all called to be servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. But are we living as servants of Christ? Are we good stewards of all that has been entrusted to our care? Are we trustworthy?

I am convinced that .. *To whom much has been given, much shall be required.* I'm not sure if I read that in the Bible or learned that from my mother .. I get the two sources of authority confused! But I know we shall be held accountable. *Some day, Roy, you will stand before God .. don't ever forget that. And God will ask you why you did the things you did.* That was my mother's voice .. but I think I hear an echo of her voice in our Gospel lesson.

As I have said, the Parables of the past few weeks are a witness to God's incredible patience, but today's Parable reminds us that ultimately there will be judgment and those who have abused their privilege will be held accountable for their deeds.

Thomas Jefferson once said, *I grieve for my nation when I remember that God is a God of justice.* What would Thomas Jefferson say if he were alive today? I think that Jefferson's words should challenge us to take stock of how we are caring for the vineyard that has been placed in our trust.

So let us keep on growing in grace and commitment to the work of the Kingdom. Let us be a people who give a proper rendering, sharing joyfully of the good things that have been entrusted to our care. Let us continue to support the mission and ministry of Calvary Lutheran Church and our common desire to care for all of God's people. But above all, let us continue to be gracious and generous in all that we say and all that we do.

We give thee but Thine own, whate'er the gift may be.

All that we have is Thine alone, a trust, dear Lord, from Thee. [ELW 686] AMEN.

[Some thoughts on The Market are drawn from an essay by Harvey Cox, **The Market As God**, *Atlantic Monthly*, March 1999, pp. 18-23.]