

**SLD10.05.08 27<sup>th</sup> Ordinary World Communion with Kwanza**  
**Emory Presbyterian Church**  
**Matthew 21:33-46**  
**Jill Oglesby Evans and Mary Kiriaku**

**“Do You Mean Us, Jesus?”**

Tired yet of hearing from Jesus?

Try hanging out with him all week. Or maybe you do. Maybe it's just me that doesn't make a habit of listening to all the hard stuff he has to say in the course of an ordinary day. Or an ordinary time, like we're stumbling through right now.

Myself, I prefer the special occasions, the high holidays – the dramatic endings of Lent, the fresh beginnings of Easter, the wild cracklings of Pentecost, the anticipation of Advent, the poignant tenderness of Christmas. Ordinary time – it's so...well...ordinary. It's oatmeal for breakfast, a sandwich for lunch and meatloaf for supper. It's up at six, at work by eight, at home by five and in bed by ten. Or whatever your daily routine is. Ordinary time is where and how most of us live most of the time. It's also where and how most of the church calendar passes. In fact, despite the color and texture of World Communion Sunday, ordinary time is where we're located right now - that loong stretch of ordinary time from Pentecost in June to Advent in November.

But if ordinary time is a lot less fun than births and baptisms, and a lot less dramatic than deaths and funerals, it nevertheless issues its own challenges, aimed more at the quotidian, the daily routines, of our lives.

And sure enough, the last few weeks we've been experiencing a series of one-two-punch-parables about just what commands and commandments Jesus expects us to be living into and out of day to day: Love God. Forgive each other. Be grateful. Don't judge. Pray. Change. Get over yourself. Get along. Get going.

And sure enough, today he's got another one for us, harsh, direct, no nonsense – "It's like this," he says. "Don't do what I say, and there'll be consequences"

Listen to this story.

**Matthew 21:33-46**

The point of the story is pretty clear, I think, don't you? But is Jesus just talking to the chief priests and elders, or is he talking to his disciples, as well? Well, of course he's talking to disciples, as well. Remember how they're all standing around listening in? But the thing about listening in to God's Word is that sometimes it's hard to do on your own. That's what community is for – to help us listen in more carefully, more honestly, maybe even more fearlessly.

We are fortunate on this World Communion Sunday to have two beloved communities come together – Emory and Kwanza – to support one another in listening well, and fearlessly to God's Word to us today. Thank you, Mary, for joining with me in interpreting today's passage.

**Mary:** So, what do you hear in this passage, Jill?

**Jill:** Well, frankly, what I hear first in today's passage is Jesus' impatience with the "institutional" religion of his day. Remember, he's still in the Temple, addressing the religious authorities of his day. Remember, too, that these are the very leaders who were, only last week, questioning Jesus' authority to do what he does. Now, it seems to me, Jesus is turning around and doing the same to them - challenging *their* authority. It seems pretty clear that the "wicked tenants" are those same chief priests and elders, the ones in charge of this particular field of faith entrusted to them by God. They're not

working it correctly, says Jesus. And worse, they go so far as to beat and kill and stone the ones sent by God to collect God's harvest.

**Mary:** And who *are* those sent by God?

**Jill:** The way I see it, Jesus is referring to God's prophets, the ones sent through the ages to guide and warn and critique and shape God's people – the Isaiahs and Jeremiahs and Hoseas and Amoses and Eduard the Agitators who keep showing up to challenge and disrupt and generally annoy authorities of every stripe. Such prophets are rarely received graciously, especially by those in charge. Who likes to be told how “off base” we are, especially when we're convinced we've got a corner on the ungarbled word?

So in this parable, the landowner, weary of being rebuffed, brings out the big ammo – his Son, his heir, his Beloved One, and sends him into the fray, thinking, “Surely my tenants will respect my heir.” But do they?

**Mary:** Oh no, they do not. They seize him, throw him out of the vineyard, and kill him!

**Jill:** And do we?

**Mary:** Do we what?

**Jill:** Do we respect God's heir?

**Mary:** Well, of course we do! We love and follow Jesus, and honor him as God's Son.

**Jill:** Hmm. You think so?

**Mary:** Well, sure! At least we don't seize him and throw him out of the church and kill him!

**Jill:** I wonder sometimes. Sometimes I think that Jesus and the church are not all that compatible.

**Mary:** How do you mean?

**Jill:** Well, I think it can be argued that whenever the busyness and survival of the church worms its way to the front of our head and hearts and hands, we're quietly seizing Jesus and throwing him out of the church. Killing him might be a little strong. Or maybe not.

There was this play I saw a long while back that left a deep impression on me, even scared me a little, for the baldness of its truth. It was by a local playwright, Jim Grimsley, and was called "The Lizard of Tarsus." Paul was from Tarsus, you know.

**Mary:** I know.

**Jill:** So, guess who's the lizard in this play. Paul, of course. And here's why. Grimsley's play begins after Jesus' death, see, and after Paul's conversion; in fact, after Paul's been on fire with the gospel long enough to have built up a pretty impressive international church, with successful new church starts in Rome and Corinth and Galatia and Antioch and so forth.

Until suddenly, Jesus shows up – you know, the Second Coming and all – and the two holy men have this very emotional reunion. Only once Jesus hears what Paul's done – created this global holy Christian empire and all, he's not pleased at all. Tells Paul that he's missed the point. That the gospel is not about brick and mortar and bulletins and budgets, but about losing one's life to God. So Jesus asks Paul to dismantle the whole enterprise and start over.

Well, now Paul's upset. I mean, he's worked so hard building up the community and the institution of the church and this is the thanks he gets? Carefully, patiently, he explains to Jesus that he (Jesus) doesn't really understand how things are now, what's

it takes to bring people to the faith, to organize them and knit them together, to help them grow and deepen in the faith – it's takes institutions to do that, organizations, communities. And that takes buildings. And buildings require maintenance. And budgets. And so forth.

But Jesus insists that buildings and creeds and denominational identities were really not what he'd had in mind, that Paul really must scrap his new venture and start over.

And that's when Paul realizes they're never to see eye-to-eye. That Jesus is not going to get it. In fact, that Jesus is a real threat to the church Paul's worked so hard to build up. A threat that needs to be controlled, contained, even eliminated. And so it is with genuine regret that Paul finally has Jesus arrested, tried, and executed...for the good of the church.

Now, that's scary.

But that's the kind of tension I'm hearing in this parable between Jesus and the religious authorities of his day, and that, quite possibly, may be alive and well between Jesus and the institutional church today. And me, as chief priest, and we, with this building and this Presbytery and this denomination - how often do we reject the stone that's meant to be the cornerstone?

**Mary:** I can see the danger. It's a worthy question to keep asking, if for no other reason than to keep us humble and alert to how we may forget whose vineyard it is we're working in, whose harvest we're reaping, and who is the Lord of that Harvest. Surely this is a part of God's living Word to us today.

**Jill:** So how 'bout you, Mary. What do *you* hear in today's passage?

**Mary:** Like you, I see the people in Jesus' parable forever missing the point of what God is doing, as though they forget who owns the vineyard, whose land it is, to whom the harvest belongs. They seem to want it for themselves and fight for it, running off all God's emissaries, even his Son. It appears they don't understand God's intention for their good, and react out of fear and greed and anger. The tenants seems focused only on what they want, what they feel they deserve, what's theirs and nobody else's, and they get violent trying to protect it and keeping it for themselves.

I see myself in this, and a lot of us, when we fail to recognize God's intention for us, and God's claim on us. When we fail to recognize that all we have is God's, and forget our responsibility to God and to others. Jesus may have been talking to the chief priests and elders of his day, but he knew his disciples were listening in. And I think he's hoping his disciples are still listening in today.

It's hard sometimes in the midst of the challenges of our lives to keep remembering the big picture, God's vision for each of us and for all humankind. It's hard not to want what we want, and focus on it, and work for it, and protect it once we get it, and not want to share too much. It's hard, but as Christians, we're called to see things differently. To remember that all things come from God, that the two great commandments are to love God and one another, and the great commission is to make disciples for Jesus.

Certainly, it's easy to assume authority over what we have – I mean, we earned it, didn't we? By the sweat of our brow? But we followers of Jesus Christ, we do not belong to ourselves; we belong to God. All that we have belongs to God, too. In this

story, Jesus reminds us of this, and insists that we stop protecting our interests over against the landowner.

**Jill:** And what happens when we don't?

**Mary:** Well, Jesus' parable makes clear that there are consequences to forgetting who the true landowner is, and withholding what is already his. Serious consequences. In the parable, the wicked tenants are punished. Jesus says, "He (the landowner) will put those wretches to a miserable death, and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at harvest time."

**Jill:** As with his other parables here of late, Jesus isn't messing around.

**Mary:** He is not. God is holy, and sovereign. God means good for all creation, and issues life-giving standards, if you will, and expects us to live up to them. The consequences of forgetting who God is, of ignoring God, or of throwing him out of the vineyard of your own life is destruction, separation, isolation, meaninglessness and despair. Perhaps even eventual omission from the abundance of the group that is producing. You'll miss out. Jesus even says you'll be crushed, broken on the building stone you've rejected.

**Jill:** Sounds a lot like 19<sup>th</sup> century fire and brimstone, doesn't it? These days we don't like hearing about a vengeful, punishing God.

**Mary:** None of us likes to hear that. But we fool ourselves if we imagine that God is only for our comfort, praise and pleasure. That God expects a great deal of us may be hard to hear, but it should hardly come as a surprise. It is very consistent with how and what Christianity is. Look, for example, what happened to God's beloved Son.

**Jill:** So this is how the story ends, with a threat? Behave or beware?!

**Mary:** Well, that is, in fact, how today's parable ends. The chief priests and Pharisees are not sure *what* to believe about Jesus' words, but they *do* feel fear at least of the crowds, if not of Jesus himself. But there's an important difference between those religious authorities and us who are listening in today.

**Jill:** And what is that?

**Mary:** We know who Jesus is. We know Jesus's story, and where we fit in it. We know that we belong to God, that God loves us, that God sent Jesus to show us the Way and that everything we have belongs to God. And if it is difficult to live up to God's standards, if it is hard to hear the consequences of fighting against God, yet we know from Jesus' life and the rest of scripture that God is with us, that Jesus rose from the dead for us, that the Holy Spirit prays for us, and that we have each other as company and support along the Way.

We miss *so many* opportunities to join with God's intention, to embody the fruits of God's kingdom and share it with one another – we all do – every day, every minute. That seems to be the nature of humanity, the struggle of our life – to remember who and whose we are, and to learn to share what we have. In fact, it seems to me that the more seriously we take God's standards, the harder it is to live up to them!

**Jill:** Until we remember God's grace, anyway.

**Mary:** That's right. Until we remember the amazing grace of a God who replaces our fear and hopelessness with the love and forgiveness of Jesus Christ. And who gives us all the time, space and support in the world to produce the fruits of God's kingdom on earth as it is in heaven. This is the goal and it is very high – but we really must keep trying to get there, though not out of fear, out of love.

**Jill:** I guess this is what it means to “fight the good fight.”

**Mary:** Yes. But we do not fight it alone. God is with us, Jesus rose from the dead for us, the Holy Spirit prays for us, and we have each other’s company and support along the Way.

**Both:** To the glory of God. Amen.