

Parables of the Kingdom

We live in an old house. I hadn't thought too much about the age or story of our house when I first moved to Indiana – a young woman, freshly graduated from college, newly married. It was all about us! As I came to know the neighbors and hear their stories of our community, I began to think more about the history of our house.

Just down the road to the east of us, lived an old woman...yes, she seemed old to me 27 years ago...and she really was old – not simply 50ish! She was close to 90 years old at that time. Some of you would remember her – you may even be related to her – Nora Flueckiger! As I came to know Nora, she would tell me about the neighborhood and the people whom she had known. She had grown up in a house a mile to the north. She had attended school on the wood's edge between the home of her childhood and her current home. She was a native to Indiana, to Adams County, to Wabash Township and to this very mile!!

It was always interesting to listen to her tell about the area that was now becoming home to me. One day, we were talking about “our” house. She remembered different families who had lived there. She said, “Yes, I remember playing there as a little girl.” A strange feeling came over me. Nora – a woman 20 years ago already 90 years of age, remembered playing in “my” house as a little girl?? Suddenly it dawned on me... “my” house, “our” house, first of all was really old. More importantly, it really hit me that it hadn't always been “our” house! Of course, I knew that it was an older home and that others had certainly lived there before, but on this day it came to me that...not only had this not always been “our” house, **but that it would well not always be “our” house!** This was one of those maturing moments! Being 20 something at the time, I hadn't considered our temporary place in the cycle of life. I hadn't considered that we'd only be calling this place “home” for awhile before it would be passed into the hands of others!

I went home and found myself wondering about those children that Nora had played with. By this time, they, too, would have to be 90 years old or more. As I went up and down the stairs, I wondered about the husbands and wives who had been up and down these same creaky stairs - carrying babies, laundry and love. What conversations and cares had been spoken of in the private spaces of this old house? This precious old house was becoming home to our family...had it been truly “home” for others, too? It wasn't so easy anymore to simply say, “This is **our** house.”

Life at Swiss Village reminds me daily that time doesn't stand still. What was once new becomes worn. What was once young becomes old. Surprisingly, this really isn't “a discouraging word.” Rather, an awareness of the passage of time frees us to celebrate and savor God's good gifts and to hold lightly to all we might assume “belongs” to us. Instead of clinging and clutching, we're invited to share – with abandon - the abundance

of life. Instead of making all things “ours,” we’re released to share with others the joy that comes from “belonging”- ourselves - to the kingdom of God!

With these thoughts about our place in the “scheme” of things, let’s look again at the parable just read for us from Matthew 21:33.

A Parable...

Let’s begin with some words about parables:

- Parables – we find them irresistible; yet as we are drawn to them they catch us by surprise and often leave us disorientated and disconcerted. (That is if we allow ourselves to be “parabled.”)
- Parables – gifts to the community as they invite us into discussion, debate and dismay – together. We need each other as we listen to the challenge of Jesus’ parables. Parables don’t work in a vacuum!
- Parables – let’s not overwork their every detail, but rather let’s listen lightly for the nuance which we really weren’t expecting. Allow the unease to linger.
- Parables – Jesus’ way to spark our imaginations toward paths of transformation instead of domination.
- Parables – mischievously simple stories which won’t allow simplistic apprehension.

For Tonight...

we’re centering ourselves around a parable about a certain vineyard, its owner and its tenants. The heading added by the editors of my Bible calls this parable, “The Parable of the Wicked Tenants.” I don’t like that so well. Be thinking about a title that you might give to this parable as we consider it again.

Let’s use our imaginations as we listen to Jesus’ conversations with the chief priests and elders on that day in Jerusalem. Jesus and these men are already well into discussion when Jesus says, “Listen to another parable.” I can imagine them – as I might, too, drawing closer listening carefully in anticipation of another lively verbal encounter with this crafty and cagy teacher!

Jesus tells a story about a landowner who embarks on a new venture – not only a new venture, but a risky and pricy one, as well! This landowner makes a great investment in the planting of a vineyard. Planting a crop of wheat or barley is one thing, but to plant a vineyard is quite another. I would compare it with planting a fruit orchard or grove of nut trees – even a greater investment than a field of alfalfa! The new vineyard will require intensive cultivation and several years of tending before any fruit will be harvested.

The landowner does it right – the plants are planted. A protective fence is constructed. A winepress is dug in anticipation of an abundant future and a watchtower is built so that the vulnerable plants will be protected. With what would seem like utmost trust in the

appointed tenants, the landowner then departs for another country. Nothing out of the ordinary here.

This sounds like a good deal for everyone involved. The tenants have the promise of steady work – not just for a day or season but perhaps for a life-time. The landowner has made a great investment and will look forward to a return on that in due season and then also for many seasons to come.

The tenants, it appears, start out in good faith. They must have been diligent in their work in the vineyard. The vineyard developed and matured. It began to produce a harvest and the landowner sent servants to gather his produce. What a great moment to anticipate! The harvest! However, what an unexpected greeting these messengers received! Instead of hospitality and honest commerce, horrible violence erupts. One servant is beaten, one is killed and yet another is stoned. The story repeats itself, more servants are sent to the vineyard. Ultimately, the landowner's son is sent, his father not thinking it possible that the tenants would reject his son. However, the son is not only kicked out of the vineyard, but he's thrown out and then murdered.

This is shocking! What has come over these once faithful stewards? What would cause them to act in such destructive ways? What could possibly be at the root of this betrayal? What has happened to the relationship between landowner and tenant? After much bloodshed the truth comes out; the tenants seek to seize the vineyard. They want it for their own. In what seems an improbable, misguided and poorly considered idea, it comes to light that the tenants had decided that if they were to kill the landowner's son then they would become the heirs! Does that make any sense? Does their formula for acquiring the vineyard follow any legal precedence? Sharecroppers becoming owners through murder? The parable bears out their folly. Even though the tenants' carried out their chosen actions it did not result in any ownership of the vineyard. Instead, they lost everything. They lost their right to work in the vineyard. Lost to them were the beauty and benefits of vineyard life. It appears that the tenants of the vineyard had forgotten their relationship with the vintner. Once the tenants lost sight of their role in the vineyard their quest for power and control led them to unspeakable atrocities. The tenants tried to take ownership in something that simply could never be theirs – no matter how much they tried.

About now, as I am listening to Jesus, I find myself saying, "What was wrong with these people? Who did they think they were? Did they think that they could simply force their way into ownership? How ridiculous, how short-sighted, how could it come to this?"

Those listening that day to Jesus reacted in much the same way. Jesus asked them, "now what do you think the owner of the vineyard is going to do when he comes himself?" There must have been a loud exclamation among them, with someone shouting, "He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will

give him the produce at the harvest time.” I can imagine many others chiming in, saying, “Yes!! Of course he will!”

Suddenly, however, Jesus starts to talk kingdom talk. Suddenly, just as King David recognized himself after the poignant parable of the prophet, Nathan, those listening realize that they have just seen themselves mirrored in this story, the parable of the vineyard. Jesus didn’t need to point it out and that made it even worse. They recognized themselves without anyone else needing to raise an eyebrow or point a finger their way. They received much more than information; a flash of insight had come that could never be undone. What a moment of crisis! What a moment of possibility!

The chief priests and Pharisees recognize that Jesus hasn’t simply been talking *with* them, but also *about* them. But before we stop here to shake our heads at the chief priests and Pharisees, I wonder if, most importantly, we note that in this parable Jesus has also been speaking about the kingdom of God.

I hear Jesus speaking about ...

- A kingdom belonging to God that is not ours to fight over. Something that can’t ever be seized. It isn’t the kingdom if I’ve got it under my thumb or if it’s captive in our camp.
- A kingdom that is only the kingdom when we share its fruit with others – The fruits of the kingdom...love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, hope... hospitality... they spoil when they are put back for safe keeping.
- A kingdom – a way of life in which the gates to it are opened wide in welcome.
- A kingdom that is like a vineyard – flourishing, flowering... fruitful.

As kingdom members,...let’s take a look at ourselves... for we, too, are tenants in an amazing vineyard. As the Emmaus Road Mennonite Fellowship, we’ve been invited into a newly planted portion of God’s abundant orchard. We find ourselves the stewards of a vineyard that God has great investment in... a vineyard that I sense was being planted long ago...and now is just entering the first exciting days of harvest. How do you feel about this? Do you find yourself sometimes needing to “pinch yourself” to see if this is really true? Let’s rejoice in this new life and invite others to share it with us. I know that from time to time, I’ve shared with some of you, saying that I’m experiencing that “calves let out of the stall” feeling! (It’s biblical!)

As we seek to be respectful of others’ feelings, may we allow ourselves to celebrate this amazing and energizing work of the Spirit among us. Tending to one another as brothers and sisters of the kingdom, rich fruit will follow. The fruits of the vineyard will spring in abundance from the goodness and graciousness of God, falling new every morning... covering us every evening...like manna & quail. The abundant harvest from our fellowship can flow through us to our wider community and beyond so that “the one who

has much does not have too much and the one who has little does not have too little.” Ex. 16:18

On the Emmaus Road, however, may we have our eyes open for an ancient contest at work within us and among us – the contest between pilgrim and settler. There may come a subtle tug that will nag at us to put up protective barriers, to caution us to hunker down and settle in, to build storehouses for ourselves– We may find ourselves tempted – just like the tenants of old to become territorial, using our energies for posting guard at the entrance to the vineyard instead of gathering and sharing its fruit.

No, it isn’t fitting to entitle this parable a “parable of the wicked tenants.” They didn’t start out with such intentions, but as they worked in the vineyard they lost sight of their relationship with the vintner and their place in the vineyard. They became anxious and threatened as they slid into a sense of ownership. It can happen to well-intentioned people – people just like us.

So let’s challenge each other to remember that the vineyard belongs to God. Let’s remember that it isn’t even possible for us to become owners of the vineyard! The kingdom which we are experiencing present among us is ours to savor and share with others. Like the wind, it can’t be tethered or contained – only experienced. Instead of something to take ownership of, the kingdom is like the yellow fall butterflies that flit from the purple sedge on one side of the road to the other. It is like the acorn that suddenly falls from its place high in the oak tree. It is like the sunlight across the field and the colors of the evening sky. It is like the horse kicking up its heels in the pasture, like the rustle of the shimmering corn stalks at sundown. The kingdom is beautiful, bounteous and bold – wild and without boundary to survey.

In this vineyard kingdom, everyone is welcome. Space is not a problem. We don’t need to push and shove our way in, or push and shove others out. We can work peaceable and joyfully among the vines. The vines - fruitful expressions of the kingdom, rooted in the deep in the storehouse of God’s generosity and abundance. The vineyard- yes, the kingdom of God, where we belong- together, working and welcoming all who seek to enter! AMEN