

Postscript from a Loving Parent

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Community Presbyterian Church - Rochester, Minnesota

20th Sunday after Pentecost - October 20, 2021

Texts: Mark 12:1-12, Isaiah 9:2-7

GOSPEL READING Mark 12:1-12

After our weeks of studying the love and lessons of parents and children in Mark's gospel, and the call to universal care for the vulnerable, Mark stuns us with this parable.

Then he began to speak to them in parables. "A man planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a pit for the wine press, and built a watchtower; then he leased it to tenants and went to another country. When the season came, he sent a slave to the tenants to collect from them his share of the produce of the vineyard. But they seized him, and beat him, and sent him away empty-handed. And again he sent another slave to them; this one they beat over the head and insulted. Then he sent another, and that one they killed. And so it was with many others; some they beat, and others they killed. He had still one other, a beloved son. Finally he sent him to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.'⁷ But those tenants said to one another, 'This is the heir; come, let us kill him, and the inheritance will be ours.' So they seized him, killed him, and threw him out of the vineyard. What then will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and destroy the tenants and give the vineyard to others. Have you not read this scripture:

'The stone that the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone;
this was the Lord's doing,
and it is amazing in our eyes?'

When they realized that he had told this parable against them, they wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowd. So they left him and went away.

SCRIPTURE READING Isaiah 9:2-7

Handel immortalized these words in song. How can we hear them afresh in the light of the Christian message to our world today?

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness— on them light has shined. You have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as people exult when dividing plunder. For the yoke of their burden, and the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian. For all the boots of the tramping warriors and all the garments rolled in blood shall be burned as fuel for the fire. For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom. He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time onward and forevermore. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.

The fierce protective love of parent for child is woven into the fabric of our world. We have seen it over and over during these past few weeks. God's passionate care for creation and all creatures echoes through the Bible. In the Old Testament, God's defense of her people is likened to the ferocity of "a mother bear robbed of her cubs" (Hosea 13:8) - and we all know how dangerous that mother bear is! Given the power of this bond, it's no accident that Jesus, God's chosen one, is referred to both as "Son of God" and "Son of Man." And that you, we, all people, are called "children of God." What image could more profoundly express God's intense love for you?

So how can it be that the vineyard owner in the parable we read just now would send his beloved son and heir to certain death at the hands of greedy, callous tenants? Don't you want to shake him, yelling, "Stop! Are you crazy? You're making a terrible mistake!" Don't you want to grab the son and snatch him away from this terrible ending? I do!

But the son's death is *not* the end of the parable; the tragedy is reversed immediately: the cancelled one is now the foundation of a new creation. "The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone." The owner *didn't* send his child to be murdered; the son did *not* go against his will. He wasn't sacrificed for someone else's sin, or offered as payment for another's debt. The absolute generosity of the father and the trusting acceptance of the son proclaim their love for one another, and their commitment to the vineyard - the world. This generosity, trust, love and commitment stand in stark contrast to those who would keep the world for themselves.

How does this story speak to us today? I believe it can reveal to us our own selfishness in keeping the goodness we possess to ourselves. I'm not just talking in terms of food and vaccines and disaster relief; I think Christians as a whole are pretty generous, though we can always do better. I'm talking about our spiritual gifts as well. What is Christianity's unique contribution to the healing of the world? And have we kept it to ourselves for too long?

The lessons of parental love from the Bible teach us that what we experience in each precious personal experience is multiplied many times over when we extend that passion beyond our boundaries. Our joy and hope are magnified when love, dignity, and care are shared. Sharing care is not just a human trait; we see it written throughout the non-human creation as well:

From *When Elephants Weep*: "Elephants appear to make allowances for other members of their herd. One African herd always traveled slowly because one of its members had never fully recovered from a broken leg suffered as a calf. A park warden reported coming across a herd with a female carrying a small calf several days dead, which she placed on the ground whenever she ate or drank: she traveled very slowly and the rest of the elephants waited for her. . . . There appears to be so little survival value in the behavior of this herd, that perhaps one has to believe

that they behaved this way just because they *loved* their grieving friend who loved her dead baby, and wanted to support her.”¹

Or maybe - I would say - even elephants recognize that survival depends more on mutual care for one another than self-preserving, self-*serv*ing, behavior. This is what we do for our “herd” here at CPC, too: I learned that a daughter of this congregation had received a special honor: Keara Ross was chosen Homecoming Queen of the Tritons in Dodge Center. Her mother Amanda wrote to me, “This past week I have been reflecting on all the people that have helped raise [Keara and her sister Katherine] and get them to where they are now. CPC is a huge part of their journey to growing up. It really does take a village and I am forever thankful to all the helping hands that have made moments and memories for them.”

In past generations, these girls might have been expected to marry close to home and raise their own children here at CPC. But the world has changed. Their horizons are wider. They may return; but, like so many others, they may not. So many children whose journey began here have traveled far and done amazing things. The love and wisdom they absorbed from you, in this place, they carry far beyond our local boundaries. I could name many that I’ve met in person, and many I haven’t met yet but feel I know from the stories of their lives that I hear from you.

And if the world has changed, so has the church (but not the faith!). Sometimes I think church people of all denominations get alarmed by dwindling numbers, and fear that new revelations of abuse will empty our pews still further. We might be tempted to circle the wagons in defense of what we consider our own special truths; we might welcome those who think as we do, and shun those who believe differently or worship in a different setting. But does this glorify God?

I had the privilege of hearing Vietnamese Catholic teacher Peter Phan this week speak about the joy of sharing what is most precious in our faith with others as deeply attached to their own traditions. I asked him that question: What do you believe is Christianity’s unique contribution to the spiritual healing of the world? He answered, “First, unique does not mean ‘only,’ but rather ‘distinctive.’ Christianity teaches and practices one *distinctive* truth, but it is not the *only* valid spiritual truth.” What is distinctive, then, about Christianity? He said something like this, “It is the truth of the reign of God, the *kin*-dom of God, the community that is shared when people love and support and nurture and protect each other, *every* other, everywhere.”² The divine passion,

¹ Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson and Susan McCarthy, *When Elephants Weep: The Emotional Lives of Animals* (Delta: 1995), 78, quoted in Richard Rohr’s daily online meditation, October 5, 2021.

² Dr. Peter Phan, Georgetown University; Wisdom Ways webinar, Thursday, October 7, 2021.

fierce as that of a mother bear for her cubs, extends to all children over the whole world. We Christians are summoned to the same calling of fierce and relentless care.³

Like a child who needed protection and nurture when he was young, who needed boundaries and limits until she learned her own sure-footed path through the world, the church has grown up. Has the time come, as Peter Phan and other great Christian teachers are urging, when we must share our distinctive offerings with the world, “not on the basis of whether people become Christian and choose to enter our household, but on the basis of the gifts that we have to offer for the well-being of the world”?⁴ Has the time come for us to look more closely for the Light that shines in the truths and traditions of others, and to learn from them, too?

In this spirit, can we appreciate even more deeply the generosity, trust, love, and commitment shared in the bond expressed so ardently between the father and son of our parable? Can we tell the old, old story of Jesus and his love in a way that brings new healing to the world? Or are we selfish and callous tenants, hoarding the fruits of God’s gifts for ourselves? I believe we are bigger than that; more courageous, more humble and more faithful.

I think the time has come to hear again the words of the prophet Isaiah, as spoken to an “us” that encompasses all people everywhere: “For unto us a child is born; unto us, a son is given; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace for every child of every land. He will establish the reign and realm of God, and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time onward and forevermore.” Amen. Thanks be to God.

Prayers

~Precious Lord, take our hands, lead us on, help us stand firm in a world that rumbles and swirls with discontent and despair. We believe and trust that you have blessed us with wisdom and understanding, joy and counsel that is sorely needed here and now. You have made us strong in our faith and in connection with one another; help us to share the spiritual gifts you’ve given us with the world.

~As we mark the milestone of over 700,000 deaths from a disease that is now preventable, may we encourage and support those on the front lines of care for people still falling victim to it.

They are heroes in your world and in our eyes.

~We know that winds of war blow far from us, yet we are not untouched by their effects. As we prepare to welcome Afghans and other refugees into our own communities, may we know the joy of sharing diversity in our common humanity.

³ Walter Brueggemann, “Vulnerable Children, Divine Passion, and Human Obligation,” from *The Child in the Bible*, ed. Marcia Bunge, 2008, pp. 399-422.

⁴ John Phiiip Newell, *The Rebirthing of God*, 2014, p. 46-47.

~Our hearts remain always with those closest to us in their grief, suffering, and illness. Remember us as your children and teach us always to pray, “Our Father and Mother in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done...”