

The Rev. Dean Lindsey

October 5, 2008

A Parable of Judgment

Twenty-seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time

Ephesians 2:11-11; Matthew 21:33-46

Last week, I began my sermon by telling you how much I liked the parable I would be preaching on that day. “It was,” I said, “short, direct, and simple.” Well, the parable I’ve read to you this morning is long, indirect, and complex. And I don’t really like it. Still, I have discovered that working with a passage that I don’t like can yield new and surprising insights about faith. In other words, leaving behind the “easy” sayings of Jesus and venturing into his harder sayings is usually worth the effort.

In the case of this parable, I’ve had a personal experience to help me along, an improbable experience. Terrifying, too.

My father was a landlord for a decade or more. Now, let me just say that I find it interesting that in the parable, it is the landlord who gets mistreated. Jesus isn’t setting up a populist tale about how the greedy capitalist takes advantage of the poor tenants. There are more than a few places where Jesus takes aim at the rich, but this is not one of them.

Yes, my father was a landlord, a small-time property owner, but a good one, I believe. He had high standards for the upkeep of his properties (I know because I did the upkeep myself for several years), he never tried to discriminate against anyone who wanted to rent from him, and he often exercised great patience with renters who were having trouble paying their bills. This is a story about one of those renters.

My father and his secretary had not heard from this renter for a couple of months. No payments, no communication, even though they had tried phoning—the phone had been disconnected; knocking on the door—no one answered; writing letters and leaving notes for the tenant—no one responded to any of these. There weren't any obvious signs of life at the place, either, and my father had begun to think these tenants had skipped town.

While I was at home on a break from school, his secretary asked me to figure out if anyone was actually living in the place. I went to the front door. There were a couple of notes from my father still stuck there. There was old, unopened mail in the mailbox. I knocked on the front door. No answer. I yelled. Still no answer. I tried to peek in some windows, but the blinds were drawn, and it was dark inside. I went around back. Nothing in the storage shed. The back door was slightly ajar, and I yelled through the door that I was from the landlord, “Anybody home?” Still no answer, so I pushed gently on the door, and it swung open.

Standing right in front of me was a thin, angry-looking woman right in the middle of the kitchen. She yelled back that she had a gun, and if I took one step into her house she was going to kill me. She yelled a few more things, but this is a sermon and you won't be hearing those things. Once I had ducked out of the line of fire, I yelled a few things, too, but you won't be hearing those either.

That was the last time my father asked me to check on an unresponsive tenant. He hired an agent to do the work from then on. Collecting rent in a tough neighborhood is dangerous business, not a job for an amateur.

That is certainly the case in Jesus' Parable of the Wicked Tenants. The landowner first sends his servants. The tenants beat one, kill another, and stone a third.

Tom Long has an effective way to tell the next part of the story. He sets it up by describing an apartment complex infested with motorcycle gangs. They've taken the place over, and they beat up or kill every employee who comes trying to collect the rent. Then, the owner has a new idea. "I'll send my precious little eight-year-old girl to get the rent. She's so pretty and adorable. Everyone loves her. They would never refuse her."

That makes us want to yell out, "Don't do it! It's a crazy plan!" And of course, it is a dangerous plan, too.

But, the landowner is not the only one with a crazy plan. The tenants' reasoning is a bit off, as well. They think that if they kill the son, they will receive his inheritance. There is no law in any part of the world that puts murderers at the front of the line in the settlement of an estate. What, really, are these brutal hooligans thinking? Robert Capon suggests one answer. They assume that the landlord is so far away—and the day of reckoning is so far off—that they can continue to do the things they've been doing without ever facing judgment.¹ In other words, they'll never have to pay for the consequences of their poor stewardship.

Now, that makes this sound like a very contemporary tale, does it not? For our financial system, a day of reckoning that always seemed so far off, has arrived. How many times did we hear over the past ten years that our economy had entered a new phase? That we're not subject to the laws of boom and bust, anymore. We've discovered the way to manage risk. Debt is not something to worry about. Housing prices will never go down.

In May 2000, *Time* magazine ran an article asking "Will the Dow Ever Hit 50,000?" One expert confidently predicted that this would happen, in not too many years, while a contrarian predicted that a long period of substandard returns lay ahead. Of course at the time, no one wanted to hear about that. On the day the article ran, the Dow closed slightly above 10,500. Today, it stands at 10,300.

The judgment being meted out on Wall Street and Main Street has been swift and severe. Even some of our tactics seeking to avoid that judgment may just exacerbate the whole situation even more.

That is just the way judgment happens, is it not? We think that it will never come, but when it does, it falls upon us full force. There is no time for mercy, and no place to hide from the storm.

The bad characters in the parable may believe that judgment will not come to them, but what if it does? Jesus poses the question to the religious leaders who are listening, “When the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?” They’ve got their answer at the ready. And I need to emphasize it is their answer that retribution is sure to come. “He will put those wretches to a miserable death.” That is not what Jesus says; that is what the temple leaders say.

They believe in a God who exercises vindictive power. A God who is ready to destroy. A God who will not show mercy.

That is why Jesus says the kingdom will be taken from the stiff-necked religious leaders and be given to another people who will produce fruit for the kingdom. They cannot understand God’s redemptive purposes. They cannot conceive of passion as a saving act. They cannot trust that God is present in the vulnerable, the unarmed, the innocent sufferer.

Indeed, these religious leaders seem afflicted by a disability that's "catching" in our world. It's a matter of perception. Something good is happening, but they see something bad. A kind action is performed, but they sniff around for something negative to complain about.

Some years ago, I went to visit an elderly couple who had come to the church I was pastoring at the time. They could not say a positive thing about anyone. They had married late in life, so I guess they were meant for each other. They complained about their neighbors, their relatives, their church, and a hundred different slights they had received. For good measure, they complained about the weather, too. I began to wonder what their opinion of God might be when an image of them standing before the pearly gates flashed through my head. I imagined them looking over the shoulder of the Apostle Peter, peering into paradise, and starting to complain about what they could see inside. For some people, heaven is not good enough.

Today's lesson is a parable of judgment. And it is a judgment upon us if we think heaven is not good enough. If we cannot trust in Christ's saving action through innocent suffering. It may be true, as some would say, that you get to have the God you believe in.

What kind of God is that? A God who is loving and kind, or a God who is brutish and holds a grudge? A God who is generous in mercy or a God who is quick to punish? Of course, the God we believe in sets the pattern for our lives.

I want to go back to the woman who met me at the door, threatening murder. She assumed that the landlord was one to be avoided. Someone who would never understand her situation. Someone who would be swift to take action against her once the judgment day arrived. So her fear turned into defensiveness, and then into threats against me. What she believed, is what she received. After the altercation with me, eviction procedures were immediately initiated.

But, I know my father quite well. I know he is a charitable man, sometimes to a fault. There were times when he showed great forbearance toward a tenant who was in financial trouble. Great empathy and understanding when a tenant was ill. Great generosity when a tenant needed a helping hand.

More importantly, I know my heavenly Father through Jesus Christ. I know that he is charitable without limits. I know he shows great forbearance when we have created problems for ourselves which we cannot solve. I know that he shows great empathy and is ready to lend us a hand. But only if we are ready to receive it.

That is the work of faith. Trusting God to be loving. And it bears much fruit in our lives.

Amen.

¹ Robert Farrar Capon, *The Parables of Judgment*, Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1993, pp. 113-114.