Sermon for the Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost

October 4, 2020

The Rev. Herbert Jones

Does some of the thinking displayed in the parable Jesus tells in the reading this morning seem sort of, oh I don’t know…dysfunctional? I’m thinking specifically of the tenants, but the landlord’s behavior seems a little strange as well. The absentee landlord wants his due, his fee for leasing the vineyard that he took so much time and effort to create. He did all the capital improvements to the land so that it would function as a vineyard, an operating, profit making concern. He leased it to tenants who presumably thought it was a fair deal. And then he sends his agents to collect the rent.

         The first group of rent collectors the landlord sent didn’t fare too well. One was beaten, one was killed and another stoned. So the landlord sent another group of slaves and the same thing happened again. So finally, he sends his son, expecting, perhaps reasonably, that the tenants would respect his son. And perhaps they should have. The whole plan of killing the landlord’s agents hasn’t worked too well so far.

         So the son comes and the tenants put their heads together and decide that since the son is the landlord’s heir, if they kill him, they will collect his inheritance. Does that make even the slightest bit of sense? What are they thinking? I can’t really imagine a scenario where that is really going to work. I don’t think the landlord is just going to give up after they kill his son, but that’s just me.

         Or not just me, as it turns out. The Pharisees agree. When Jesus asks them what they think the landowner is going to do next they reply, “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.” And this seems like a good answer. It seems like justice, the kind of justice that we think of as appropriate in the face of the kind of wickedness and evil behavior displayed by the tenants in the parable.

         The word “justice” can be a pretty power-packed word with different connotations for different people, depending on where they are philosophically located at any particular time. There’s a wide spectrum of meaning when we start talking about justice. A conservative radio talk show host once warned his listeners that if they ever went to a church and heard the people there start talking about justice, they must leave right away, because they’re in a liberal church. I don’t really believe that of course. It’s just one of many examples of leaders from both sides of the political world usurping our language in such a way that the church can’t talk about anything without it becoming “political.” But I digress.

         The scriptures speak of justice from both ends of the spectrum. At one end justice can be described as retributive justice, justice as retribution for our sins. From this perspective justice can look something like punishment or even vengeance. I want to read you a passage from Deuteronomy that will likely give you a little taste of the kind of justice I’m talking about when I say retributive justice. This is what Deuteronomy says happens when we don’t do God’s will:

**16**Cursed shall you be in the city, and cursed shall you be in the field.

**17**Cursed shall be your basket and your kneading bowl.

**18**Cursed shall be the fruit of your womb, the fruit of your ground, the increase of your cattle and the issue of your flock.

**19**Cursed shall you be when you come in, and cursed shall you be when you go out.

**20**The Lord will send upon you disaster, panic, and frustration in everything you attempt to do, until you are destroyed and perish quickly, on account of the evil of your deeds, because you have forsaken me. **21**The Lord will make the pestilence cling to you until it has consumed you off the land that you are entering to possess. **22**The Lord will afflict you with consumption, fever, inflammation, with fiery heat and drought, and with blight and mildew;

You shall become an object of horror, a proverb, and a byword among all the peoples where the Lord will lead you.

This is my bible that I had during seminary. You can see that I have the biblical “nerd tabs” so I could look things up quickly. It’s fun to go back and read it and see what I underlined and wrote in the margins. In the margin next to what I just quoted I wrote the words “seems harsh”. And it does!

         At the other end of the Justice spectrum we have what might be called “restorative justice.” This is justice designed to restore broken relationships in a way that protects the dignity of all involved and also reflects God’s desire for us to all be in relationship. I believe this is the kind of justice that is talked about in Micah 6-8 which says:

         “With what shall I come before the Lord,
    and bow myself before God on high?
Shall I come before him with burnt offerings,
    with calves a year old?
**7**Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams,
    with ten thousands of rivers of oil?
Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression,
    the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?”
**8**He has told you, O mortal, what is good;
    and what does the Lord require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
    and to walk humbly with your God?

“Doing justice” in this context doesn’t sound like it has anything to do with retribution, being joined with the ideas of loving kindness and walking humbly with God. This kind of justice seems more like fairness and trust.

         And all of this leads me back to the Pharisees in the parable from this morning’s gospel reading. They are very clear in their answer about what needs to happen to the evil tenants who have beaten and killed those that the landlord has sent to collect his due, including his son. They should die a miserable death.

         But then the Pharisees figure out what Jesus is talking about. He was talking about them. In the parable, the landowner is God, the Pharisees are the tenants, the first people the landowner sent were the prophets of Israel and the son is Jesus. This encounter is taking place in the last week of Jesus’ life and everybody knows what the Pharisees want done with Jesus. They want to kill him, and would if they weren’t afraid of the crowds.

         In the end they do kill him; we all know that. And so how does God, the one who sent him, respond? Does he condemn the leadership to a miserable death like they think the landowner should?

         No, he forgives them and his Son is resurrected, and resurrection is all around us all the time. God never gives up. God never gives up on us. God’s desire for true relationship with those God created, us, is so strong that no matter how badly we behave, and no matter how overwhelming our seeming desire to go it alone, to try and prosper without God, God always gives us more chances. God never gives up.

This is what God’s justice looks like. If our own sense of justice conformed more to that of God’s, rather than the Pharisees, I can’t help thinking that the world would be in a much better place.

Amen