

Jesus, the Candidate of Change...

Readings for the 27th Sunday in Ordinary Time: October 5, 2008

Isaiah 5: 1-7

Psalm 80

Philippians 4:6-9

Matthew 21: 33-43

When we think of Jesus' 30+ parables recorded in the synoptic accounts of Matthew, Mark and Luke, I'm betting that the first stories that come to mind are the "Good" ones—the Good Samaritan, the Good Shepherd, the Good Seed. I doubt that "the Good Butt-Kicker" would ring a bell, but that's the story we hear this week in Matthew's Gospel of the wicked tenants.

In this 21st chapter of Matthew's account (written at the time when the 40 years of friction between the Jews who followed the teachings of Christ and those who maintained the primacy of Mosaic Law finally resulted in the expulsion of those early Christians from the synagogues) Jesus is in the middle of a two-chapter long tirade against the Pharisees and elders of *his* time.

We heard the beginning of that harangue two weeks ago in the story of the eleventh hour workers who are paid the same wage as the early hires, and again last week in the "tax collectors and prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God before you" story of the two sons called to work in the field.

We'll continue to hear Jesus' chastisement of the authorities through the next three weeks, with the parables of the "many are called but few are chosen," story of the wedding feast, and the "render to Caesar what is Caesar's" rebuke to the entrapment-minded Pharisees.

Mathew's account is rife with "woe to you hypocrites" criticism of the local authorities, as are the Gospels of Mark Luke and John, so we're pretty familiar with the picture of Jesus scolding the religious leaders of his day. But it's important to remember that, as much of an "outsider" his criticism of the Pharisees may make him, Jesus is speaking *not* as an outsider, but, in his erudition in and reverence for the Mosaic Law, as a colleague, himself a bona fide rabbi of the pharisaic tradition.

Jesus' ultimate reverence for the Mosaic Tradition is brought to light most powerfully in the closing week of this extended harangue when, in the last verses of chapter 22 which we'll hear on October 26, Jesus is asked by the Pharisees "Tell us, teacher, what, is the greatest commandment?" ...to which Jesus responds "You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and the first commandment. The second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. The whole law and the prophets depend on these two commandments."

Here, of course, we get to the nut of the matter.

Why is Jesus so incensed by his fellow teachers? Why does he curse liken them in this Sunday's Gospel to "wretched men who are to be put to a wretched death?"

As a human being, Jesus is frustrated, knowing that his learned colleagues who have studied the scriptures and pledged loyalty to them, who have all the same information that he does, still just don't get it. As the Son of God, Jesus is disheartened that the irrepressible, selfless love, beauty and graciousness of his father (to which Paul's letter this week so eloquently invites us) is

supplanted by the self-advancing, self-protective missing-the-boat teachings of the pharisees.

What does Jesus want of us? What is the nut of it all for us third millennium vineyard tenants?

Would Jesus want tenants for his father's garden who recognize that their fields are beautiful gifts entrusted to them for their wise stewardship, or tenants who see their vineyards as vehicles for short-term profit maximization? Are we called to be tenants who see ourselves above and separate from the tenants of other fields, or as planetary co-habitants inextricably tied together by divine familial bonds? Are we to be tenants who welcome workers as co-laborers whose unique contributions bring added, not diminished, richness to our harvest, or will we see newcomers as interlopers, competitors for limited resources? And, as citizens facing an election and believers facing an institution both rich in tradition and rife with potential as an organic, ever-evolving work in progress, will we be willing to call our beloved nation, and our beloved church each to move from the comfort of stasis to the dynamic changes that lead to their highest fruitfulness?

And are we willing to see ourselves, not just "those people" as needing to have our butts kicked as a catalyst for the changes we will need to make in how we think and how we act if we truly want to live as people who love God, and our neighbors as ourselves?

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