

St. John's Episcopal Church
Hamlin, Pennsylvania
The Rev'd. Ronald Royce Miller, Ph.D.
Eighteenth Sunday After Pentecost
8 October 2017

Scripture readings:

Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20 Psalm 19 Philippians 3:4b-14 Matthew 21:33-46

Did you hear that parable? They're nuts! Have you ever heard the definition of insanity? Doing the same thing over and over and over again expecting a different result. Well, here's Jesus giving us a parable which I think essentially informs us that God is nuts, that God is crazy! There is nothing about the behaviors of these people that makes sense. There is nothing reasonable here, neither on the part of those who were in charge of the vineyard or the owner. Do you agree? So what in the world is this all about?

I think it gives us a couple pieces of information of what it is we are like as human beings who are put in charge of somebody else's vineyard for a while, and we often and repetitively act as if the terrain which is entrusted to us is our own property and we are allowed to benefit from it as if we owned it and we, therefore, act toward the real owner in a very inappropriate way. We are welcome to understand ourselves as the laborers in that vineyard who inappropriately regard that which has been given into our charge to care for and to husband and to farm and to nurture and to cultivate as our own, and when the owner sends his slaves to collect, we abuse and mistreat them repetitively.

This, by happenstance, is a pretty good stewardship text, isn't it? We owe the owner of the world all that we have and are, which we confess in all of our catechisms is God. We think a tenth is a lot, but we make the mistake of equating the Church with God. Let's not make that mistake. Let's work in our stewardship effort to understand that everything we have and own and have power over *is* God's - our money, our property, our relationships, our associations, our ideas about other people, to say nothing of our ideas about God.

Now I don't care what anybody says about this parable, any owner of a vineyard who would send his son to run the risk of being treated the way his slaves were is cockamamy, nuts, wacky! Well, if the people who are in charge of the vineyard are portrayed by Jesus to be a reflection of who we as people are, then Jesus is also making a suggestion about what God is like. Could it be that Jesus' understanding of God is so peculiar, strange, and unlike the prevailing religious ideas about God, that God looks crazy? We know what the religious people think because these are not words that come from Jesus' mouth. After Jesus gave the illustration, the people to whom he was talking said to him that God, the owner of the vineyard, will put those wretches to a miserable death and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce of the harvest. Those are not words of Jesus. Those are the words of popular religion. Those are the words some of us speak today. And those are the words we want to hear when we think of ourselves in relationship to others and in our political discourse. We want to know that somebody somewhere will be punished and will suffer God's wrath.

You may or may not be aware that last Sunday after the eight o'clock mass we had a hot and heavy coffee hour. It was absolutely splendid! It led to a passionate pounding of a fist on the table. My coffee jumped out of its cup! We were talking about important questions, and one of those questions was, "Can really bad people like Hitler go to heaven?" I see great anxiousness in this room. *[laughter]* That's precisely where we were at coffee hour last week, and it's a good place to be. It's where we need to think as Christians.

My problem in the beginning is, first of all, we think we know something about heaven. Did you hear the text from Exodus this morning? "**You** speak to us, Moses, and we will listen, but do not let God speak to us or we will die." God is too big, God is too wonderful, too crazy, too nuts, too powerful, too much everything for us to hear, and we're scared of him! There was a popular religious idea that if you saw God you would die. It was too much to absorb. So you speak to us, Moses. You can see where ideas of priesthood and hierarchies in churches come from, can't you? Ancient history in communities of faith.

But here is this idea that God must punish somebody, and it will always be and is amongst us now even in this room at this very moment. "Am I good enough not to be sent to hell because I certainly know people who are worse than I am." And it was said again today at coffee hour: "Well, I never murdered anybody." I can

guarantee that you have assassinated somebody's character along the way.

We know that churches and religious traditions develop degrees and kinds and quantities and categories of sinfulness. My Catholic friends can help me with the difference between venial sins and mortal sins. The venial sin is a smaller transgression. Mortal sins are going to cost you your life, and you're going to go to hell, or at least to purgatory, and you'll have to buy your way out.

We believe that God's mercy and forgiveness are always present, always available and always operative. We don't want to think that because we want to say if you've been bad and you've killed God's son, you're going to be cast out and tortured and killed yourself. God's mercy doesn't apply to you, but it does to us because we are repentant and, therefore, our penitent attitude becomes our good work. So I'm sorry and, therefore, God loves me more than you who aren't sorry. And Jesus, I think, junks it all and he is suggesting that God is crazy enough to keep coming back to this vineyard with his messengers, his slaves, and his son, despite the treatment that is received here because God has a message for us and for the world which seems nuts, seems crazy, not rational, is not reasonable, but *is* divine. And divinity scares the living bejabbers out of us. We don't want to hear from God. Moses is good enough. But God's kind of love is not religious. It's crazy! It's universal! It belongs to all people for no reason, not because we are loveable, but because we *need* God's love, and some of us may be fortunate enough to wake up to that, but we don't deserve it.

If you heard the prayer at the beginning of the mass today, it says it better than I ever will: "*Pour upon us the abundance of your mercy, forgiving us those things of which our conscience is afraid, and giving us those good things for which we are not worthy to ask, except through Jesus Christ.*" So the prayer today indicates that Jesus has this cockamamy idea about God and God's love which doesn't match with the religious traditions of his day and frankly, friends, I firmly believe doesn't match much of our religious thinking today. We do want to know who's in and who's out. We want to know that somebody can't go to heaven, and at the same time we are just as anxious to know that we *can*. And there it starts, which means we are worthier than thou and thine.

So I become more and more satisfied not knowing about heaven because I'm afraid it's going to be crazier than I can imagine. So when Mary Krueger asks her question about whether or not a bad person goes to heaven and whether or not the rest of us at coffee hour refine that and get down to Hitler or Lenin or Stalin...can we find anybody closer to home? They were not repentant, but we run the risk as penitent people of saying our repentance *earns* us God's forgiveness. I think this gospel text says that God's forgiveness is crazy enough that God goes back to the places where people are not repentant. They killed the slaves, they killed the slaves, they killed the son, but where did God go? Right back there. Where did the owner send his best? Right back there.

So this tells us something about ourselves, and it tell us about Jesus' ideas about God. We know that Jesus inherited the tradition expressed in Exodus, that God is too great to be talked to, seen, or associated with - has to come through a mediator, through Moses, otherwise we'll die. And here's Jesus saying, "No!" I think God really wants to live with us murderers, sinful people, good guys and bad guys of all kinds and all places everywhere and that God works harder than we can imagine to crawl into this world and be present here even now with us. You know this is practice for the Christmas story where God is born on a barn floor. And you know what's on a barn floor. The importance of that story is that the nature of God is to enter the world at its lowest and least deserving place.

This turns all of the religious ideas upside down, when religion is the business of keeping yourself clean, pure, kosher, a man is known by the company he keeps, circumcised - and that's where the epistle lesson comes in. Paul is saying, "If it comes to that kind of religious behavior, I've got it all, and it's all junk." I have the right parents, I'm circumcised...and none of it matters because Jesus brings this new idea of God's love for all people on any side of any given wall, boundary, barrier, and that means people we don't know, it means people we know and don't like, it means terrible sinners.

When our children are naughty, we like it when they feel bad and are sorry. Then it's easier for us to forgive them. And we think that God is just like us. Well, I don't know. I think God is crazy enough, nuts enough, big enough, and so much larger than the way I deal with things and think about things that there is this extraordinary and enormous surprise about God, and it is in the end, friends, the most liberating idea that I can

imagine in terms of religion to believe - and this is where humility is required - that if God can love me and I have looked in the mirror and know that I really deserve zilch - that's what the prayer of the day is about - I don't deserve any more than any other criminal in the world from God, but God gives it all to me freely and intends for that gift to be given to everyone freely. That is radical Christianity as far as I can tell. Or if "radical" is a word that upsets you - simple Christianity or Jesus' understanding of God (which has nothing to do with what people think about Jesus). I think that's where we really get messed up as a Church sometimes. We have spent so many thousands of years worrying about what it is we say about Jesus and ignoring what it is Jesus says. Here is this extraordinary idea that Jesus has about God loving all people, not because they deserve it and not even because they're repentant, but because they are God's children. That's it! We are loved by God.

I heard it said this week that a priest was asked whether or not a lay person could bless plastic bags that had been crocheted into mats for homeless people to sleep on. The answer from the priest was, "No. A priest has to do it." I'm glad to see many heads shake no. It seems to me the blessing is in there by virtue of the hands that bothered to crochet the darn things and the hearts that anticipate that need and provide that simple little product of discarded plastic bags, for goodness sake. And a priest would say, "No. A priest has to do that." Well, the priest is too late, if you ask me, because the blessing is in there by virtue of the creation of the thing. And it's that kind of jealousy about religion and religious identity, etc., that gets us into trouble.

I need to share with you that I wrote a letter this week. Uh oh, here we go again! *[laughter]* It was a letter to Augsburg/Fortress Publishing House, the Lutheran publishing house, to the presiding bishop of the Lutheran Church in America, to my bishop in New Jersey, and to the editor of *Living Lutheran* magazine - because of the little pocket diary that I get, the little red book you see me use - "my brain," I call it. For the first decades of my ministry it was given to us. Now we have to buy them. I realized this year that, unlike most of the previous years, it did not include the dates of the Jewish holidays. I called the publishing house and asked why. I was promised I would hear in an email and I didn't. I called back and spoke with some person in the organization who said, "Well, we made that decision because of the audience." Now I assume that meant Christian pastors, Lutheran ones, at that. So I wrote back and said, "I am in that audience, and I am a consumer because now I have to buy the darn thing - ten bucks. I really want to know why that decision was made because those are holidays that Jesus himself celebrated." We live in a time when we are invited to believe that others are not the recipients of God's grace and love and are not our brothers and sisters - those from whom we descend ideologically and religiously. At the end of my letter I asked them to consider editorially to include Muslim holidays in future calendars.

Do you see how easy it is to take a religious position that probably has nothing to do with the way Jesus sees things, and you see why more and more I think it's a waste of time to worry about what people think about Jesus than it is to pay attention to what in the world he said and to whom he said it. He said what he said to the Church of his day, and they were serious, honest, good, church-attending, tithing, religious, Sunday School teaching people, but he perceived that they got it wrong in their understanding of who God was and how God relates and intends to relate to people, and then he saw how that screws up how people think they can relate to other people or not. So you can either look your Mexican brothers and sisters in the eye and have a conversation and deal with that or you build a wall and you don't deal with them at all.

So it was yesterday, in consequence of visiting a junk shop up in Honesdale, I was introduced to a deacon from the Eastern Orthodox Church whom I was glad to meet. We got talking and I may have been guilty of pushing buttons. I don't know. *[laughter]* But I was getting some kind of righteous things about the Roman Church, the western Church, having a celibate priesthood. Well, you know it's much healthier to allow them to be married, and the eastern Church has married priests except at the episcopal level. You can't be married and be a bishop in the Orthodox Church. Ah well, that's monastic. OK. And then, of course, I raised the issue of women being able to proclaim the gospel. Oh, not in the priesthood; women have their own roles. I understood where it came from - old, European cultural stuff. I started to realize that the temperature was going up and the emotional stuff was really becoming less and less rational. And not that I'm comparing myself to God - please don't do that - but I self-consciously saw myself just putting my hand on his arm. And all of the temperature

went down, the irascibility disappeared, and we departed as friends.

I wonder whether or not our job as Christians is to have good clear different opinions with others but also to make sure we're close enough to put out our hand and touch the arms of those with whom we disagree. Because that said it all. Then we weren't engaged in a battle of ideas, but we could agree that we had something in common if it was nothing more than nice manners.

And so I think we are given the craziest of gospel lessons today, the absolute wildest, most ridiculous examples of the wild and ridiculous kind of love God has for us as people. And we are invited to look in the mirror and make a confession of who it is we are not. Our confession doesn't make us good. Our confession simply tells us who we are, and long before we do that, God knows. And long before we get there, God forgives. The business of making a confession is understanding how hard God's work is to love us, and then we might come to the idea that it's just as hard - or maybe just as easy - for God to love those we cannot stand ourselves. Religion takes practice because these are not popular ideas, but they're good ones, and I think they're good ones that come from Jesus about his relationship to his Father/Mother/Creator and his brothers and sisters around the world, and I think we all know for a fact that he found it easier to love the people who were outside of the Church than those who were in it.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.