

Pentecost 21

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A little girl kneels in the middle of the kitchen floor building a house out of brightly colored blocks. She constructs a beautiful house with round green columns in front. The window openings are framed in red and orange blocks and the doors are a beautiful dark blue. Just as she was about to place the finishing touch, a bright red chimney on top, the back door opened and her mother walked in with groceries. As her mother pushes the door closed the floor shakes and the house tumbles into ruins. The little girl jumps up in frustration and kicks the blocks. Looking at her mother, she begins to cry.

Life is like that. All of us know disappointments and frustrations, some minor and some more deeply painful. From our earliest childhood memories we learn that the best laid plans some times just do not work out as expected. Just this week we have watched what was happening in the financial market and wondered what to expect as the floor shook.

Businesses that were "too big to fail," a market that would just absorb unwise decisions, debt that kept growing larger and larger all seemed to come home to roost this week as legislators scrambled to rescue a tumbling market. We looked at Wall Street and told ourselves, greed did this. Certainly greed abounds on Wall Street but it lives in us as well with our enormous homes, multiple cars, huge credit card debit all because we became so focused on ourselves that we forgot. We forgot that we are part of a larger creation. We forgot everything is related and depends on the rest of creation. We forget that we are part of a community and that community is part of a larger creation.

It amazes me how relevant the Bible can be at times. Most of us think of the Bible as an ancient document that contains some truths but addresses a different time and place. There are times when the readings appointed from Scripture seem to be chosen for our hearing in our own day. Such seems to me to be the case today.

Today in the Gospel we hear the story of a man who planted a vineyard. He did everything he could to protect his vineyard, he planted a hedge around it to keep the animals out, he put up a tower to make it easy to spot intruders, and he dug a vat to store the grapes at harvest time. Then he leased

the vineyard and left on a journey. Business as usual meant the tenants did all the work associated with tending the vines so a harvest was guaranteed. The lease required that a portion of the harvest be reserved for the owner of the vineyard, after all it was his property, and such an agreement was not unjust in any way.

At the time of the harvest, when the land owner sent his servants to collect his due the tenants beat the one, stoned another and killed one. They did the same to a second group sent to collect what was rightfully due the land owner. Finally, the landowner sent his son, thinking the tenants will surely respect his son and give the landowner that portion of the harvest that was his. But the tenants kill the son in order to claim the vineyard as their own.

Wow! Whoever said the Bible is not full of bloodthirsty stories? What in the world were the tenants thinking about? What could possibly lead them to believe they could keep the harvest and ultimately the vineyard for themselves? Why did they think by killing the owner's son they would gain his inheritance? What possessed them?

What possesses anyone who acts selfishly? Just look around you at the world in which we live. God gives us this good earth to live in, we pollute it with waste, we spoil the air and the water, and we deplete its resources without consideration of others even the generations to follow us. God gives humanity the ability to choose between right and wrong and we think only of ourselves, our needs, without regard for the fact that others have needs as well. The world we live in has been spoiled by greed and selfishness.

We live in what some have described as a Nike world. The Nike story is that whoever dies with the most shoes wins. The Nike story is that there are no gifts to be given because there is no giver. What we end up with in this world is what we manage to get for ourselves. This story is what causes anxiety, fear, greed and brutality. It produces an indifference to the poor, divisions among people and environmental abuse. It tells us not to care about anyone but ourselves.

Paul wrote to the people of Philippi: "The end of such people is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things." Human greed focuses on immediate gratification, having one's own way without regard for others. Greed lives in a self centered

universe. It cries out, "God? There is no god but me." Sadly, we have seen the result of the cry of the earthly minded.

The earth is good - created by God for our benefit. What turns the earth bad is our misuse and abuse of that which God has provided. When we begin to think of the harvest as ours not to be shared, rather than a gift from God, it will turn sour on us. The earth itself will rebel against us. If our best laid plans leave God and God's children, the whole of humanity, out of the picture; we are as blind and foolish as the tenants of the vineyard. We think that by killing the servants we can claim the vineyard as our own and use it strictly for ourselves.

Jesus reminded the people of his day and us, God will not save us from the consequences of our own unwise or unrighteous actions. Sooner or later we have to pay for the decisions we make. If we close our eyes to those around us and think only of ourselves then we will one day have to suffer the consequences. God does not punish us for unwise decisions either, the world has the uncanny ability to do that. The fact that I am a person of faith does not make me immune from the law of cause and effect. There is no such thing as a free lunch for any of us. If we fail to govern our own actions, someone else will govern them for us.

Jesus says it another way. You cannot serve God and mammon. You cannot have an appreciation for the creation and do what you please with your money, your land, or any of God's creation. Unfortunately, Christians have a long history of trying to ignore the fact that we are but stewards of the creation. We try to ignore the fact that the Bible constantly reminds us the earth is the Lord's and all that is in it. We are but tenants - tenants who are charged with being good stewards. Good stewards protect what is committed to our care and when the time comes stewards who provide to the landowner his due.

The creation is infused with the Creator's generosity. We must find procedures, institutions, practices that allow God's generosity to work for all people. Our faith, our hope, indeed our calling is to trust the generosity of God and do our share to protect the creation so that all creatures great and small may rejoice in the Lord.