

THE OWNER'S SON

A SERMON FOR WORLD COMMUNION SUNDAY
OCTOBER 5, 2014
FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
MARIANNA, FLORIDA
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MATTHEW 21:33-46

I've preached on our text this morning a number of times over the years, and there was always something about it that troubled me. As I read it a few minutes ago, I almost changed the word slave to servant, as some translations do. But after looking at the original language, I concluded that Jesus did indeed refer to those who were sent to the vineyard as slaves.

I suppose the institution of slavery is fairly fresh in my mind because of the events of last weekend, when the Battle of Marianna was re-enacted on its 150th Anniversary. Whether one views the Civil War or the War Between the States as being about slavery or about states' rights, the end result is the same: at the beginning of the hostilities, slavery was legal in some of the United States of America, and at the end of the fighting, it wasn't.

Ironically, freed slaves fought on both sides of the Battle of Marianna, and at least one died and may or may not be buried in the cemetery of St. Luke's Episcopal Church.

At the time of Jesus, slavery was an institution in the Roman Empire, and Jesus, of course, lived and was crucified, dead, buried, and raised up from the dead, under Roman Rule, as we affirm when we recite the Apostles Creed, recognizing that He suffered under Pontius Pilate, who was a Roman official, namely the Procurator of Judea. The Apostle Paul included in his writings instructions to both slaves and masters.

Did the Jews at the time of Christ own slaves? Only the wealthy ones. I am certain that the Herods, the ruling family of the Jews, did, but whether the average small town merchant or farmer did is dubious, just as small town merchants and farmers in the 1860's did not own slaves, or if they did, it was only one or two, and often they would have been indentured servants.

A slave belongs to someone. A slave has an owner. A slave is no better, or no worse, than a piece of property or livestock. A slave is owned. But being owned, belonging to someone, having a master, is not always a bad thing.

A dog without an owner, a dog without a master, is a dog who belongs to no one, and is a homeless stray. So, in the days after the Emancipation Proclamation freed the slaves, many of the former slaves found themselves without a home, without a place to live or a job, and they wandered the roads, like strays.

A slave may love his master. And a master may love his slave. Or a slave may hate his master, and the master despise the slave. Some masters trusted their slaves with everything. Remember, Pharaoh trusted Joseph, who was a slave, with all the finances and wealth and stores of Egypt.

In our parable, the master leases his vineyard to tenant farmers, and then, when the time comes for the rent to fall due, sends his slaves to collect it. And the tenants, rebellious, dishonest, beat one, killed one, stoned a third. He sent others, and they were treated the same way. Finally, he sent his son, his heir, and the tenants killed him, planning to claim his inheritance as their own.

When Jesus questioned the chief priests and elders about this parable, it was obvious to them that the owner should cast out the wretches and lease the vineyard to more worthy tenants.

And in their own words, they condemn themselves: they are the tenants. The vineyard is the land that God has placed them upon. And because they have rejected the prophets, rejected the ones God had sent with His word, and because they were plotting even then to betray and arrest and murder God's only son, they were guilty of what they were so outraged had been done by the evil tenants of the vineyard.

The kingdom of God will be taken from them. And given to people who produce the fruits of the kingdom.

Jesus is not speaking of an earthly kingdom here, of the land that is called holy, of Judea or of Israel, of Palestine. Jesus is speaking of the kingdom of God, the kingdom of heaven. Because they have rejected, cast out, stoned, even put to death the prophets of God, and because they are plotting to do the same thing to Jesus, and will eventually, they stand in judgment.

As I reflected on this parable this week, I thought about it in a context I had never thought about it in before: and this is the conclusion I reached.

We belong to God. We say it in our Brief Statement of Faith, the contemporary expression of what the Presbyterian Church U.S.A. believes. Now nearly 30 years old, it begins by stating that in life and in death we belong to God. We Presbyterians are the people who believe that we belong to God.

We quite often use the word "servant" to refer to our relationship with God. We are God's servant people. We sing the old hymn, "Ye Servants of God, Your Master Proclaim". One of my old friends up in Georgia never speaks of God in any other terms than as "The Master" or "The Old Master."

In this parable, we have the choice of being a rebellious, treacherous, dishonest, tenant, or being an obedient, trusted slave.

We belong to God. In this world, on this World Wide Communion Sunday, the choice is between being a tenant, or being a servant of the Lord. In the words of Joshua, as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.

In live and in death, we belong to God.

And the owner's son died that we might have life, and have it more abundantly.

And to Him be the power, the glory, the dominion and the praise, in the church and in the world, now and forever more. Amen.