

The Tyranny of 'Mine'
Matthew 21:33-46
Everton Hills
8 October 2017

When you see an **image like this** what do you think of?

Clip Finding Nemo

Two friends were walking in the forest one day when suddenly they stumbled upon a large grizzly bear who decided that they looked like a good snack. The two started running away when all of a sudden one of them stopped. The other said, "What are you stopping for? Don't you know the grizzly bear is right behind us?" His friend replied, "I am tying my shoe so I can run faster." At this he couldn't help but laugh, "What you think you'll outrun the grizzly?" The friend replied, "I don't have to outrun the grizzly, I only have to outrun you."

At the heart of who we are, of how we live, is our own self-centeredness. Let's call it the **Tyranny of Mine**. Be it caused by an innate need for survival, or simply because of our own insecurities, selfishness is a dominant gene in the human race. The fact is our selfishness nullifies our being created in the image of God. You may not realise, but it is less than 80 days until Christmas. And while there is often a call to put Christ back into Christmas, the reality is that perhaps we should start by putting Christ back into Christian. Because our selfishness, and our fear of what might be, often invalidates our witness of God's grace and love. Our selfishness, our fear, denies that God really is the provider of all that we need – and therefore it robs us from living an abundant and fulfilling life.

And that's a problem! The thing that we desire the most, and snatch at, is the thing that stops us from achieving it. The fact is, a Duke University study discovered that ***"Self-centered egotistical people score lowest in any test for measuring happiness"***.

Put a little differently, when we become focussed on something that is bigger than ourselves, we discover joy and purpose in life! Or as Martin Luther implied in his understanding of sin, the inward turn towards oneself does not merely destroy an individual but the very fabric of human community. In our pride we attempt to make ourselves our own god, the ground of our own existence.

And that is what Jesus challenges when he tells the parable of the tenants in the vineyard. In effect, Jesus explains how God intercedes in the lives of egotistical, self-centered, selfish people to build a community of grace and love.

³³ ***"Listen to another parable: There was a landowner who planted a vineyard. He put a wall around it, dug a winepress in it and built a watchtower. Then he rented the vineyard to some farmers and moved to another place. ³⁴ When the harvest time approached, he sent his servants to the tenants to collect his fruit.***

³⁵ ***"The tenants seized his servants; they beat one, killed another, and stoned a third. ³⁶ Then he sent other servants to them, more than the first time, and the tenants treated them the same way. ³⁷ Last of all, he sent his son to them. 'They will respect my son,' he said.***

³⁸ ***"But when the tenants saw the son, they said to each other, 'This is the heir. Come, let's kill him and take his inheritance.' ³⁹ So they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him.***

⁴⁰ *“Therefore, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?”*

⁴¹ *“He will bring those wretches to a wretched end,” they replied, “and he will rent the vineyard to other tenants, who will give him his share of the crop at harvest time.”*

(Matthew 21:33-41, NIV)

Now, to understand the context, Jesus tells this parable at a time when he is having argument after argument with the chief priests and other religious leaders over his authority. He has just entered into Jerusalem, (it is part of the Palm Sunday story in Matthew), healed the blind and the lame, and has challenged the injustice of the religious sacrificial system – that is, he has overturned the tables in the temple.

Now on face level, this is clearly a parable directed at the religious and political leaders of Jesus’ day. And that makes sense. Verse 45 concludes

⁴⁵ *When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard Jesus’ parables, they knew he was talking about them. (Matthew 21:45, NIV)*

Yet it is more than that. Parables like this speak to more than historical points in time. They transcend time. We can’t simply say that Jesus directed this parable to the Pharisees and chief priests, and therefore we are the ones who inherit the kingdom of God.

We cannot turn our backs on the significance of this parable so quickly.

Our own selfishness and self-centredness, our quickness to condemn others and not be conveyers of God’s grace, love and mercy, must challenge us, must make us feel more than a little uncomfortable so that we take more than simple passing glance at what this scripture might say to us.

If Jesus walked into Prince of Peace today, to whom would he address this parable? You? Me? Someone else?

You see God has given us life itself. Yet instead of offering ourselves as living sacrifices, as Paul told the Christians in Rome to live, so often we live simply with our need and our desires in mind. We live for ourselves. We do our own thing. We make decisions based on how they benefit us, rather than on how they build others up. Be that decisions that relate to how we do church, or decisions about what we do for holidays or where we spend our money, or how much money we might give away, or whatever else we might need to make choices about, if we are honest with ourselves, we have great difficulty in truly living for others!

There is a story in the Old Testament, where God tells Abraham

“Go from your country, your people and your father’s household to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing.... all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.”

Genesis 12:1-3, NLT

In our consumer-orientated society where do most people direct their blessings? To themselves? Or to others?

Yet what does God say?

In Genesis 1, he tells us to manage and care for the world... yet the history of humankind tends to suggest that our response has been everything from pollution and global warming, to the elimination of animal species, to the hoarding of the earth's resources.

In Micah 6, in talking about what we can give to the Lord, Micah says
***No, O people, the Lord has told you what is good,
and this is what he requires of you:
to do what is right, to love mercy,
and to walk humbly with your God. (Micah 6:8, NLT***

The point is simple. We are still like the wicked tenants.

Yet, and this is what I need you to hear. Despite who we are. Despite our selfishness and self-centredness, we worship a wild and foolish God.

Instead of wiping us out, and replacing us with better tenants, he sent his son. There was no army. No judgement. Just love. Love and grace enacted by an act of redemption!

That is why God is wild and foolish. He doesn't operate by human logic or human reason. That logic and reason would see revenge and retaliation.

No. He acts in a wild and foolish way. He loved us, lived among us, and died for us.

And God continues to do that today!

Though the world might seemingly be in moral decay, God stills acts in a wild and foolish way toward us. Even though we are still selfish and rebellious and uncaring and judgemental, God continues to call us his own.

But more than that. He fills us with his Holy Spirit so we be connected to him. He turns the bad things that we do into good things. And the Spirit continues to nudge us so that we can still be a blessing to others.

May we see ourselves for who we are... we stand with the wicked tenants. But it is by God's grace, love and forgiveness, that our wild and foolish God continues to do amazing things through us.