

Isaiah 5:1-7

Psalm 118: 19-24

Philippians 3: 8-14

Matthew 21:33-46

Sermon 10-8-23

THE FINAL WORD

By Rev. Dr. Don Algeo

Summary: The message of Christ is personal, not political, timeless, not historical.

One of the great preoccupations of modern Biblical scholarship is to examine closely the words and sayings and stories of Jesus as recorded in the various Gospels, and try to determine what elements accurately reflect what the actual words of Jesus probably were, and what might have been added to or changed in those words by the gospel writers, or perhaps by the sources and oral traditions that the Gospel writers used in constructing their narratives.

In our Bible Study group, we occasionally go into some detail regarding these possible additions and amendments, but we're not going to do that here. For today's purposes, suffice it to say that the parable recorded by Matthew for this morning's Gospel reading provides a pretty clear example of having undergone considerable evolution, as becomes evident when you compare it to the versions of the same parable offered by Mark and Luke, and especially to the version of the parable that we find in another very early document that is simply a list of the sayings of Jesus, without any of the accompanying narrative.

When we do such a comparative analysis, we find that the story or parable that Jesus actually offered was probably quite a simple one about the vineyard owner sending a couple of representatives to collect the rent, and then finally sending his son, whom the tenants murder. In this simpler version, having told his story, Jesus asks his audience what should be done with the tenants, they answer that they should be killed, and Jesus then responds with a quotation from Psalm 118 mentioning the stone the builders rejected.

Because of the additions to this simple story that were probably added by Matthew, this parable has traditionally been interpreted as Jesus speaking prophetically about his own death, and about how the responsibility for carrying on the work of Jesus would be shifted from the Jewish world to the Christian world.

But although, because of the additions he made to it, that may very well be the correct interpretation of Matthew's version of the parable, I don't think it speaks at all to what Jesus was talking about, when he originally offered his simple story.

We've argued before from this pulpit that at least most of the story parables of Jesus are not fictional creations, but rather actual events in the world which Jesus relates, and then asks us to think about how they reflect on the message of God's universal and unconditional love, which is the heart of Christ's good news, of the gospel Jesus offered to the world. In this particular parable, he reminds his audience of the case – perhaps a case of which they were already familiar – of an absentee landholder who finally sent his son to collect the rent he was due, and how the tenants murdered that son.

But now we get to the crux of the matter. Instead of drawing his own conclusion from the story, Jesus instead looks at his audience and simply asks them a question: What do you think should be done?

And notice their answer. What they think is that the evil and greedy tenants should be punished, should have their land taken away from them and given to somebody else. And of course that's what we all think, too, in listening to this story. That would be the right thing. That would be justice. That's the way the world evaluates it.

But what does Jesus think?

Matthew and all the other versions of the parable tell us how he responded to their answer. Did he say, Right, you got it? Those evil tenants will get exactly what they deserve.

No, that's not what he says. He says something dramatically different. He reminds them of something they had read countless times in their own Scriptures but had never really understood. He quotes from Psalm 118, the same Psalm we often quote from in this church at the beginning of our service. Jesus said to them, "Have you never read in the Scriptures:

*The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone;
This was the Lord's doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes*

To my ear, far from being an endorsement of the answer he has just received to his question, our Lord's response is a rejection of that answer.

The cornerstone the world requires is the stone of prideful self-reliance, the stone of its own wisdom, even its sincere moral wisdom. The stone the builders rejected, the stone the world's builders must always reject, is the stone of absolute and unwavering faith in the Word of God, The Final Word that came in the flesh in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. That's why I so often cite the passage as we begin our Sunday service, as a reminder that for an hour we are going to turn away from the world and what it thinks, and focus on the Son of God and what he thought and continues to think. And where there is conflict, we commit to following Christ, and not the world. We set the world aside, and turn to Our Lord for The Final Word.

"Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding," as the Proverb says (3:5), or as Paul writes to the Corinthians: "...the wisdom of the world is folly with God." (1 Cor 3: 19)

God is not in the business of laying down laws and punishing those who disobey. That's the way the world works. That's the way landowners trying to collect rent work.

God is in the business of forgiveness. That's what Jesus teaches, here and everywhere. And those who can't learn this lesson are missing out on all the riches of the Kingdom. That's why He concludes His lesson with a warning that the Kingdom of God will be given to those who respond to this truth. This isn't a prophesy of Christianity breaking off from Judaism. It's simply a description of how the Kingdom of God works, and how to begin to thrive in it. And that's what gives a special poignancy to the reaction of the chief priests and the Pharisees, as recorded by Matthew, on hearing Jesus teach. "...they knew that he was speaking about them," Matthew tells us.

They knew that he was speaking about them.

And isn't that the question we should always be asking ourselves as we try to distance ourselves from the particular historical circumstances in which Jesus lived, and try to see whether and how His thought applies to us? For the fact of the

matter is that the instruction Jesus came to offer was not intended only for a particular group of people at a particular historical time. The chief priests and the Pharisees who were in the audience when Jesus spoke his parable knew that he was speaking about them. But in the exact same way, when we hear the parable, we must be aware that Jesus is speaking about us.

The world we live in is markedly different from the world of the chief priests and Pharisees. We don't lead lives governed in every detail of dress and behavior and food and celebration and worship by 613 specific rules found in the first five books of the Old Testament.

But here's the thing. Just like the Pharisees, all of us do lead our lives, down to the smallest details, in accordance with **some** combination of habits and principles, we operate out of **some** sense of duty and obligation, sometimes to people, sometimes to our job, sometimes to our country, sometimes even to what we see as our religious or moral duty.

The point is that our lives here in twenty-first century America are shaped by influences that we each got from **somewhere**, even though the source of our influences are most certainly very different from those that influenced the Pharisees of Christ's time.

Jesus was not arguing against some particular set of rules for how we are to live our lives. His opponent was not Phariseism, or any other 'ism'. Jesus was not against anything. He was simply for something, for one single thing. He holds it up, He says: Here it is. How does your life compare?

And so when we hear from Christ about what the Kingdom of Heaven is like, and when we hear from Him that what matters most there, unlike here, is forgiveness, and mercy, and humility, and truthfulness, and subtracting from rather than adding to conflict, and not boasting, and always going the extra mile...when we hear these things and many more from Christ's own lips, do we at least pause for reflection, do we at least consider that there might be room for improvement, do we at least ask ourselves this most simple and yet most important of all questions: In my life, who has the Final Word?

And so, gracious God, this morning we pray for an openness of heart and mind, a self-awareness that will allow us to appreciate how our characters have been shaped mainly by chance and the accidents of circumstance, a willingness to bring those characters under review, and the Divine gift of the strength to make

modifications. We pray for the poverty of spirit that lies at the foundation of every life honestly lived under the guidance and in the Spirit of your dearly beloved Child, Our Final Word, Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray.