

Holy Fools

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Matthew 21:33-46

In this parable we find Jesus rubbing salt into wounds by telling a story in which tenant farmers are the bad guys. The very existence of tenant farmers and absentee landlords in Israel at the time was a festering wound because families were supposed to farm their own land. The division of land described in the book of Joshua was, along with inheritance laws, understood to ensure that each family could farm their own patch of land in perpetuity.

The connection between family and land had been eroded over the centuries, and one challenge in the first century was the crippling impact of Roman taxes and Temple taxes. Many families could not afford these taxes and so sank further and further into debt until they lost their land. When their land was bought up by a very small group of increasingly wealthy people, the family that had owned the land for centuries might, if they were fortunate, then become tenant farmers on land that had belonged to their family for centuries. And they would be expected to hand over so much produce and money to their landlord that they would often be left without enough to live on.

So, when you read this parable with that background in mind, you might find you have just a little more sympathy for the tenants. Farmers who have lost their land and are now watching their children starve may well become desperate enough to beat up messengers from some rich absentee landlord.

So this story, which might be very familiar to some of us, like all Jesus's stories is less simple than we may have thought.

As Jesus turns from parable to interpretation, he doesn't directly equate the landlord with God, and we need to be careful not to do that either, but Jesus invites us to ponder: in what ways is God like this landlord, and in what ways is God different?

Do we ever think of God as an absentee landlord? Do we think of God owning the universe and demanding more from us than we can give, exploiting us and exploiting the land without any compassion for either?

There are certainly people who think the Christian God is exactly like that; who think that God is some sort of watchmaker who set the universe in motion then sat back to observe the chaos unfolding from a distance – just sending messengers every now and then to make sure we are behaving ourselves.

When things are going badly in our lives, we might be tempted to feel like God is a great distance from us, where our tears seem insignificant.

But the landlord in this story is very different from the usual absentee landlords of the first century. After a succession of slaves is beaten up or murdered by the tenants, the landlord decides to send his son! This is a seriously stupid and reckless move that no landlord with any sense at any time in history would ever make – *unless* of course the son was backed up by a small army. And clearly that isn't the case here.

What sort of crazy person is this landlord? Crazy because he gives far too much benefit of the doubt – “surely they will respect my son!” No sane person would think that! And he is crazy because he meets violence with gentleness and vulnerability. He is crazy like the shepherd who left 99 sheep to find one who had wandered; crazy like the father who gave

half his property to enable a good-for-nothing son to abandon his responsibilities, and then waited desperately for him to return.

This is the sort of crazy reality that Jesus calls the Kingdom of Heaven!

Notice that it is Jesus' listeners who assume the landlord's next step would be to finally employ the violence any landlord *they* knew of would have used after the first incident. Jesus didn't say that. Jesus leaves the story unfinished.

He leaves his hearers – and us – to ponder. How far down does the crazy gracious vulnerability of this landlord go? Will he eventually snap? Will the tenants eventually see beyond their own sense of grievance and understand that the landlord has also been hurt?

Will everyone in this system eventually realise that what matters is not the money they can make by exploiting each other but the relationship they could have if they could see each other as fellow human beings rather than as enemies?

The behaviour of this landlord seems crazy because it is the opposite of what the received wisdom of our world would suggest we should do. Living by the values of God's kingdom, rather than the values of our culture can make any of us look a little crazy. In many ways, those who live by the values of that kingdom are holy fools.

And that brings us to St Francis, who is known for renouncing wealth and property, kissing the sores of people with leprosy.

About the order he founded, he prayed:

Grant me the treasure of sublime poverty: permit the distinctive sign of our order to be that it does not possess anything of its own beneath the sun, for the glory of your name, and that it have no other patrimony than begging.

Francis was born with an incredibly sweet and winning personality. Everybody loved him. That didn't make him a saint. It made him a good salesman. In his early life, he took full advantage of his good looks, family connections and winning personality, without much concern for the people he exploited. He was helping to grow his family's prosperous cloth business when he was called by God to question, and then walk away from, the things he had done and the person he had been.

Some experiences of hardship – a year as a prisoner of war and a serious illness, along with his first spiritual visions – caused him to slow down and change his way of living. He repented of his tendency to use other people for his own pleasure.

He began to believe he heard God speak to him, telling him to repair God's church which was in ruins. He took that literally and, in an action that is not generally considered a step toward sainthood, he misappropriated funds from his family's business and gave it to the priest of a local church that was in disrepair.

We can't condone theft, of course, but we can see what was going on in his mind at this dawning of spiritual maturity. He considered human law and he considered the call of God, and he chose to do the latter.

His father took a dim view of these goings on, disowned him and accused him before the bishop. The bishop urged Francis to place his confidence in God to provide everything he needed. He again took this literally. He stripped himself of everything his father had given him, and standing naked in front of the bishop, his father, and a crowd of people, and said he was glad that God was now his only father.

Again, I'm a little ambivalent about whether or not that was the right thing to do, but I can see that by choosing the vulnerability of nakedness he was echoing the crazy, holy vulnerability of the landowner in the parable.

For him, walking away from wealth and privilege was not so much a sacrifice as a sort of Exodus. It released him from slavery to business obligations and allowed him to live in the freedom of poverty. It released him from slavery to family obligations and allowed him to genuinely embrace every creature as a brother or sister – not just every human but every animal, every plant, even the earth and the moon. He was freed from relationships constrained by financial transactions to seek relationships based only on love.

Jesus said we can't serve God and Mammon – the god of money. Money will always get in the way of our relationship with God. Money also gets in the way of our relationships with humans and other creatures.

As we saw with the vineyard parable, as long as the tenants and the landlord viewed each other only in financial terms they could never meet each other human to human without violence. The only hope for them was for the tenants to follow the landlord's vulnerable example by becoming holy fools who value relationship more than money.

That is our only hope for our world today, especially for the healing of our planet. Many economists speak of the good economic sense it makes to invest in keeping climate change in check. Their arguments make sense to me, but it seems that when we put money at the centre we are signing up to the mindset that caused the damage in the first place.

Our hope for real healing of our planet is in ceasing to think about our relationship with creation in financial terms – what it gives us, what it costs us – and to see in creation only sisters and brothers to love and be loved by, to give freely to and receive freely from.

A few years ago, when I was living in a rectory next to the church I served at the time, I noticed a huge Rottweiler dog tied up behind the church. I was somewhat concerned, both about the dog and about people having to walk past the dog. Rottweilers, as you may know, are big and scary looking.

It turned out that she belonged with a man who was also rather big and scary looking. I discovered that he had been through a really tough time and had nothing to fall back on – except his dog. He was staying in a hostel that didn't allow dogs, so he was leaving her behind the church at night while he looked for a place where they both could live.

They both looked big and scary, but only on the outside. The man had been humbled by circumstances and knew he had nothing going for him except his sweet, gentle dog, and he knew that she was all he needed.

It wasn't too long before the man found a place to live and I didn't see him again. I suspect that life continues to be a struggle, but I'm confident they are both in good hands.

I am not going to say that it was good for this man to experience poverty. Poverty only ever ceases to be an evil when we freely choose it, as Jesus and Francis did. What I will say is that in his poverty he had a companion who stuck by him, not because of any legal contract or financial obligation but because of love and loyalty.

Only love and loyalty.

Those of us who have known the love of a dog or other pet know that it is not just about mutual obligation. There is a crazy irrationality to it, like the craziness of the landlord who chose to be vulnerable with those violent tenants.

And Jesus said that sort of craziness is what the Kingdom of Heaven is all about.

And that's why we bless our pets today.

So, if you have a pet with you, you might like to sit them on your knee. If not, you might like to find a photo of your pet or another animal you care about – or just bring that animal to mind.

May the Lord Bless you from nose to tail,
and fill your life with fun and cuddles and good health.
May your home be full of affection and rest and always enough food.
May you receive only kindness from the humans you meet,
and feel safe enough to always be kind
to human friends and furry ones.
And may you in your animal way
Give praise to God your creator
By being just what God has made you to be. Amen.

We also acknowledge today the sad reality that our pets usually have much shorter lifespans than we do, so we carry through life our love and our grief for all the pets who have left us too soon. So, let's pray for those who are feeling sad today as they remember animal friends who are no longer with us:

Compassionate God,
We thank you for the animals you have brought into our lives
To love us and to be loved by us.
Thank you for the memories that make us smile
And those that make us cry.
Comfort, we pray, all who are mourning the loss
of animal friends today;
Bless their tears,
Be their constant companion in grief
And give them hope for the dawning of your new day. Amen