

Pentecost 17, Proper 22, Year A, 2014  
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY  
The Rev. Dr. Raewynne J. Whiteley

Today is a day  
when we shift gears.  
It is the first week of our annual stewardship campaign  
and so we are going to step aside from our focus on the psalms  
and think a little more deeply  
about what Jesus has to say to us in the gospels.

And today  
the gospel reading  
focusses on a parable,  
a story that Jesus told  
so that he could teach the people who crowded around him  
something  
that they might otherwise have missed  
about God.

And the place where he is doing the teaching  
is the temple.  
This is, Matthew tells us,  
the last week  
of Jesus' life here on earth.  
He has come into the city in glory,  
riding on a donkey,  
crowds waving palm branches  
and shouting in acclamation,  
"Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!"

And he goes to the temple,  
And he isn't exactly diplomatic about his presence.  
He goes into the temple precincts,  
where there is a whole marketplace  
everything you could possibly need for your religious obligations:  
birds and animals for sacrifice,  
booths selling prayer shawls,  
probably some souvenirs and trinkets.  
But there's one thing that makes this different  
from other marketplaces.

Here  
you can't use  
any old money.

Here  
you have to use special  
temple money.  
And so the first thing you have to do  
is exchange your money.  
And to do so  
they charge you  
a premium.

And here comes Jesus,  
and goes straight up to one of the tables of the money changers  
grabs one side  
and tips the whole thing over  
coins scattering across the ground  
and the money changers scrabbling after them.  
And then it does it to another one,  
and by the time he gets to the third,  
there are children waiting  
ready to run in and grab the coins as they fall,  
and he's drawn a crowd  
and there's laughter and mocking  
and next thing you know  
the religious officials are there,  
angrily demanding to know what he is doing.  
And then a blind woman  
comes to him,  
and he heals her,  
and a man who can barely walk,  
and he heals him,  
and the crowds who welcomed him with the palm branches have caught up,  
"Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!"  
they shout,  
and the religious leaders begin to panic,  
"Don't you hear what the people are saying?"  
they accuse him,  
and so he leaves the temple  
and goes back to the village  
outside the city walls  
where he has been staying.

Now it's Monday,  
and Jesus is at the temple again.  
But this time  
there is no fanfare,  
no crowds waving branches,  
no tipping over of tables.  
Though the authorities  
are not happy to see him.  
“What right do you have to be here?”  
But his answer  
confuses him  
and afraid of the crowd  
they let him be.  
And he finds a comfortable step to sit on  
and begins to tell  
stories.

“Once upon a time, a man had two sons...”  
You remember that one, we heard it last week.

And the next one,  
“There was a landowner who planted a vineyard...”  
That's the one  
we heard today.

It's a terrible story,  
about someone who planted a vineyard on their ancestral land, but had to go away.  
So he found someone to run it,  
leaving it, he thought, in safe hands.  
But when it came time for harvest,  
and he sent someone  
to pick up the grapes  
so they could be made into wine,  
the tenants took the owner's servants  
and beat and stoned and killed them.  
Twice,  
that happened.  
So finally the owner sent his son.  
Surely the tenants would respect him.  
But no, no, they murdered him.  
And of course, the owner  
came straight back

and took revenge.

That's the story.  
So why did Jesus tell it?

Just think about who was there.  
There were Jesus' disciples, the twelve of them,  
and probably some others  
who had followed him all the way  
from Galilee in the north  
to Jerusalem.  
And some of the crowds  
who had welcomed him into the city  
and wanted to hear more.  
And some people with illnesses and disabilities,  
hoping he might take time out from talking  
to heal them.  
And some passers by, attracted by the crowds,  
and in the background  
religious officials  
concerned to keep order,  
and merchants,  
worried about whether their tables would be next.

It's tempting for us to assign all those people  
to different roles in the story.  
Especially the religious officials and the merchants - they always get to be the bad guys.  
And the people waiting for healing  
the innocents,  
and the disciples  
the faithful.  
But I wonder.  
Is that what Jesus is really saying?

Because in some ways  
it seems like key  
is not the parable itself,  
but what follows.

Jesus says to them, "The kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom."

Who is the you?

Is it  
 the religious officials  
 who have given their lives to serving God in the temple  
 and providing a safe space  
 for people to worship God?  
 Is it the merchants  
 who make a good living - perhaps better than is fair -  
 but also make it possible  
 for people to fulfill  
 their religious  
 obligation?  
 Is it the people who have come  
 to see what Jesus can do for them?  
 Is it the crowds  
 who welcomed him into the city  
 but later that week  
 will shout, "Crucify him!"?  
 Is it the disciples  
 who have been following him for the last three years,  
 but who will abandon him  
 in the time of his death?

Who are the people  
 who welcome the one  
 who will become  
 their cornerstone?  
 Who are the ones  
 who will bear the fruit  
 of the kingdom of God?  
 Who are the ones  
 who will respond  
 to the many generous gifts of God?

Today  
 we celebrate the feast of St Francis,  
 one who was incredibly aware of the blessings of God  
 in creation,  
 and as we celebrate the blessings of God  
 in our furry and feathered and finned friends,  
 I'd like to invite you now  
 to think about where you see God's blessings.  
 Then find someone near you - preferably not a family member - try the pew in front or behind,  
 introduce yourselves

and then share some of the blessings you've experienced from God and how you might thank God in response.