

Sermon -- October 1,2 2005  
Proper 22, Year A  
Isaiah 5:1-7; Psalm 80; Philippians 3:14-21; Matthew 21:33-43  
by Gerald Ardito

Good morning.

As many of you know, I am now a Science teacher here in Croton at the Middle School. One of the things that I have found the most surprising in this transition to teaching is the, what seems to me, inherent struggle between conformity and chaos.

I'll give you an example. I am teaching my 7th graders about the Scientific Method, the process by which an observation about the world can be translated into first a question (like "How can geckos stand still on glass") to a theory of about why that might be so (thousands of microfilaments on their feet which create thousands of electrical attractions which together override the pull of gravity).

So, this week I gave them the following assignment: they were to work in teams to develop a paper airplane which can fly for at least 10 seconds. Now, imagine what happened at soon as they got to work. In the blink of an eye, there were kids and paper and airplanes everywhere. They wanted to know if they could use tape or paperclips to add weight. It was exciting. And it was terrifying. I thought, what if the principal comes in and sees this mess. I'll be gone for sure.

And so, I tried to rope them in. To calm them down. To deflate the momentum that was happening. All to contain my own discomfort and fear at the chaos that was ensuing.

The next day, it started all over again. Early in the day, several students came to me to show me their new and improved paper airplanes. They were excited, and motivated, and having fun. All the things we say we want in our students. A couple of the students were so excited they created a class chair and demonstrated it for me.

I was exhilarated, to be sure, but my head wanted to explode, so great was the discomfort I was feeling. Yes, I wanted them to “go nuts” because that is where I believe real learning takes place. But the process was really, really scary.

So, what does all of this have to do with our readings for today?

In reading and listening to Matthew throughout this year, I have been struck time and time again by how he presents Jesus, especially Jesus as a teller of parables. Matthew always makes sure that when he writes of Jesus telling a parable, as he does in today’s reading, that there is a clear message, a definitive moral.

Before we go further, let me give you some of the context of Matthew’s Gospel. The book of Matthew was written sometime around 70 CE. This is a critical time for the Jews because that is the year that the Romans destroyed the temple in Jerusalem. A time when the very center of what it had meant to be a Jew was literally torn to the ground.

And, as you might expect from our own experiences of either personal, cultural, societal, or natural catastrophes, this was met with many different responses by Matthew’s Jewish (yes, Jewish) society. At the time, there were four major sects of Judaism, of which three are familiar to us: the Essenes, who lived outside the gates of Jerusalem in a type of monastic existence which, by the way, included a sacred, communal meal; the Sadducees, who believed that proper observances to God required adherence to the Law as written; and the Pharisees, who were the popular leaders of rabbinic Judaism, which sought to shift the authority from a centralized priesthood to local teachers and scholars (the rabbi).

It is into and from this context that Matthew writes. Matthew, alone among the four canonical Gospel writers, highlights the Jewish origins of Jesus. Matthew presents Jesus as having the authority and wisdom of Moses and as the leader of the proper path for

Israel. In this way, Matthew is throwing his hat into the ring in the battle for the future of Judaism during this time of crisis.

For Matthew, this Gospel writing business, this portrayal of Jesus as the future of Judaism is a very high-stakes proposition. Literally, a struggle of life and death.

So I guess Matthew can be forgiven his rush to tie up Jesus' parables in a nice package. He (and his community of followers) could not afford to leave much to chance. Their vision of Jesus had to be totally "on message" -- clear and well-defined.

Today's reading is no exception.

We can get a glimpse of Matthew's re-telling by looking at another version of the vineyard story from another source. The Gospel of Thomas is one of the oldest collection of the sayings of Jesus (it is older than the big four of the canon). Here is the vineyard story from Thomas (read parable from Thomas 65):

*"He said: A good man had a vineyard; he leased it to tenants, that they might work in it (and) he receive the fruits from them. He sent his servant, that the tenants might give him the fruits of the vineyard. They seized his servant, beat him, (and) all but killed him. The servant went away (and) told his master. His master said: Perhaps <they> did not know <him>. He sent another servant; the tenants beat the other also. Then the master sent his son. He said: Perhaps they will have respect for my son. Those tenants, since they knew that he was the heir of the vineyard, they seized him and killed him. He who has ears, let him hear."*

Here the parable is much less defined. Instead of an allegory about a blood sacrifice, Jesus' listeners would have been faced with something which was very familiar -- the struggle between the landowner, and the peasant tenant farmers whose labor and lives were inextricably tied to the landowner's sense of mercy and justice. They would work the vineyard, but only barely reap any rewards. And, if we let ourselves, we can imagine

that kind of conversations about justice and mercy in the Kingdom of God that this story might have raised.

The story as told in Thomas is open ended. He adds no moral, no punch-line. His version is provocative but not proscriptive. And this can make us, and probably made the original listeners, very uncomfortable. We can think of this version as Jesus unplugged.

The problem, at least as I see it, is that this containment is often very much at odds with what Jesus' vision of the Kingdom of God. We are studying the New Testament this year in the Education for Ministry class, and one of our early chapters said that the Kingdom of God is never defined in the New Testament because it is something that would have been clearly understood by the audience to which Jesus was speaking. To me, this is pure nonsense. If it were true, why would Jesus spend so much time (as we are told throughout the four Gospels) using allegories and parables reveal his vision of the Kingdom to his companions?

If Jesus' vision of the Kingdom of God was so clear, why does Matthew need, time and time again, as Betsy has pointed out all year, to go through the trouble of adding the moral of the story, the punch line?

I believe that part of the answer lies directly in Jesus' vision of the Kingdom of God.

Unlike most of his contemporaries and predecessors, Jesus did not talk about some future. Instead, he taught that the Kingdom of God was right there and right then, or right here and right now. He said that entrance into the Kingdom was a matter of healing one another and sharing meals and caring for each other, not a matter of ritual law or purity. Unlike his followers to our time, he does not exclude anyone as being ineligible from the Kingdom of God.

I have to believe and I do believe that this is a message that both illuminates our lives and perpetuates itself. It is also a message of sheer disorder and discomfort. We can see why Matthew would try to muzzle it. As I tried to muzzle my students.

If we were to fully accept Jesus' vision of the Kingdom of God, I believe that our heads, by which I mean who we know ourselves to be -- the certainties and boundaries which we use to define ourselves -- would quite literally blow off our shoulders. But we also know, whenever we have had been blessed by grace to see a glimpse of Jesus' vision of the Kingdom of God, that we might even embrace this disruption, this chaos and learn to tolerate, if not welcome, the discomfort that follows.

So, if we allow ourselves to be open to the chaos and discomfort of the unknown and uncontrollable, we might find ourselves singing a slightly modified version of the words of Isaiah:

What more was there to do for my vineyard  
that I have not done in it?  
When I expected it to yield grapes,  
did it yield wild grapes.  
And now I will tell you  
what I will do to my vineyard  
I will remove its hedge ...  
I will break down its wall ...  
it shall not be pruned or hoed  
For the vineyard belongs to the Lord of hosts ...

And so I pray that each of us can find the courage to live together trusting in the fullest possible expression of the Kingdom of God and welcoming the chaos and embracing the discomfort it will surely bring.

Amen.