

My Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

Jesus was probably the greatest story-teller of all time. He loved teaching by telling stories. We call them parables, but they really are stories that have a moral or a truth to them.

Recently, I came across a story that had perhaps a truth to it, but I'm not so sure about the moral. It's the story of a recently retired couple. One morning they were sitting down with their coffee, discussing all aspects of their future. Eventually the husband asked his wife, "What will you do if I die before you do?"

After some thought, the wife said that she'd probably look for a house-sharing situation with three other single or widowed women who might be a little younger than herself, since she is so active for her age.

The wife then asked her husband, "What about you? What will you do if I die first?"

Without hesitation, he said, "Probably the same thing."

I guess that's not a really Jesus-kind-of-story, is it? But, Jesus' parables are always about real-life situations and real-life people.

It's always important to recognize to whom Jesus is addressing his parable. In the instance of today's Gospel reading, he is addressing "the chief priests and the elders of the people", who were the leaders in the community. They were all people who were familiar with the Scriptures. He intended for them to recognize themselves as the "tenants" to whom the "landowner", that is, God, had given them all that they had, with the intention that they would make a return to him a fair share of the harvest

However, when he sent servants to obtain his fair share, that Biblically was always understood as 10%, the servants were stoned and beaten and killed. These "servants", Jesus knew "the chief priests and elders" would recognize as the Judges and Kings of what we call the Old Testament. The second wave of "servants" sent, who were likewise mistreated, would have been interpreted as the Prophets of old. Finally, the "landowner" sends his son, whom Jesus, of course, was interpreting as Himself, and He, likewise was killed because the "tenants" did not want to acknowledge that all they had was not really theirs, but belonged to the "landowner".

When he asks "the chief priests and elders", "What will the owner of the vineyard do to those tenants when he comes?" They answer him, "He will put those wretched men to a wretched death and lease his vineyard to other tenants."

Do you notice how Jesus neither agrees nor disagrees with their response? Rather, he quotes Psalm 118: “The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; by the Lord has this been done, and it is wonderful in our eyes?” He then tells his listeners “The kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that will produce its fruit.”

Unfortunately, our Gospel text today doesn’t tell us how the “chief priests and elders” reacted to Jesus’ response, however, in the next verses, St Matthew does. He tells us they got it. They knew Jesus was talking about them. Matthew says, “They realized he was speaking about them.” And he goes on to say, “Although they sought to arrest him, they had reason to fear the crowds who regarded him as a prophet.”

Do we realize that Jesus is also speaking about us? Do we recognize that all that we are, all that we have, really belongs to God and that He expects us to make a return unto Him of all with which He has blessed us?

Too many of us are satisfied to believe that we have earned all that we have achieved and acquired by virtue of our talent and hard work and everything we have belongs to us. If we make a return to God at all, it tends to be what’s left over, rather than the Biblically-mandated 10% of the first fruits, to which He is entitled. If that is your tendency, can’t you hear the Lord speak to you today, “I say to you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that will produce its fruit”? This is an exhortation for us to see ourselves as workers in the kingdom of God in this time and in this place, giving Him his full-share of our time, our talents, and our treasure. In refusing to see ourselves in that light, we like “the chief priests and elders of old” are rejecting God’s Christ.

You see, it really isn’t about us or what we have or even what we give. It is about how faithful we are to the God who is so faithful to us and blesses us in all that we are and all that we have. It is, as the Lord says elsewhere in the Gospel, “the measure with which we measure will be measured back to us.”