

Back to School IV: You Don't Throw Away Your Boxes

A sermon by Rev. J. Harlen Rife

Philippians 3:4b-14

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Matthew 21:33-46

If you read the gospels regularly, you start to notice that they each have their own personality. They emphasize different things and they have different areas of interest. One of my seminary professors pointed out that you can tell a lot about the four gospels by how they begin. Mark is the shortest gospel and very action oriented. He doesn't spend any time talking about Jesus' birth or childhood. He starts with John the Baptist and Jesus in the Jordan. Luke is the social justice gospel, and the one with the most robust story-telling. He begins with angelic visitors to the parents of John the Baptist and Jesus, and the narrative of a humble birth in a stable. John is heavily influenced by Greek philosophy. He begins with an esoteric poem about Jesus' spiritual connection with God the father and his role as the Word made flesh.

Matthew is often cited as the most Jewish gospel. That is to say, he is the one who spends the most time making the case that Jesus is the fulfillment of Jewish prophecy – the long-awaited messiah. He regularly ties stories of Jesus to earlier stories in the Old Testament. He begins his gospel with a genealogy of Jesus – through Joseph, interestingly enough – that traces Christ's heritage back to great Jewish figures like David and Moses. There's another side to Matthew. He's both the most Jewish, and the most anti-Semitic of the gospels. He argues that Jesus is the fulfillment of Jewish prophecy, but then he can't explain why so many ordinary Jewish people didn't embrace the new Christian faith. So, while he's praising Jewish heritage in one line, he's excoriating his Jewish neighbors in another. Today's passage is from that harsher side.

In this story, Jesus offers a parable about some tenants in a vineyard. The owner builds a beautiful, well-defended vineyard and leases it to some tenants. Those tenants settle in and begin to act like they own the place. The owner sends servants to collect the rent, but the tenants beat them and send them away empty-handed. Finally, the owner sends his son to collect what's due. The tenants do not respect the son either. Instead, they kill him believing that, without an heir, the owner will eventually lose control of the vineyard and they might gain it. Jesus asks the crowd what the master should do to these tenants and they call for harsh punishment. In case the crowd isn't picking up the metaphor, Jesus explains that this is the kingdom of heaven that God has given to his chosen people. However, they attacked the prophets God sent, and now they are rejecting the Messiah. So, salvation will be given to strangers. The religious elites are enraged and go away plotting Jesus' demise – ironically fulfilling the events described in the parable.

We have to be careful about passages like this. When they were written, the Christians were in the minority. Matthew's harsh words were directed at the powerful establishment of his day and voice the fears and frustrations of a marginalized group. Unfortunately, when Christians achieved political power, they lifted these passages intended to comfort the persecuted and used them to persecute Jewish people in Europe and around the world. So, what do we do with this passage? How can the Holy Spirit use it to speak to us, today? I'm going to take it in a slightly different direction. I want us to think of ourselves as tenants.

I was at Marta's elementary school this summer for a kids meet-and-greet on the playground. Marta made a new friend right away and the kids introduced their parents so we could exchange information for playdates. In talking to the other child's mom, I learned that they were a military family who had spent the first part of their married life in base housing. She asked about us and I explained that we are a pastoral family who live in parsonages. We looked at each other and said the same thing: you never throw away your boxes. You don't own your home. You know one day you're going to move, and that's always in the back of your mind. You don't buy extra furniture. You think about the size and weight of the things you buy. You live lighter because you know the day will come. We're not planning to go anywhere anytime soon, but still, as we have unpacked from this latest move, we've broken down and stowed all the boxes in the attic. You never throw away your boxes.

When I re-read the parable of the unfaithful tenants, I see a warning not to get too comfortable. All that they owned – the place they lived, the fields that generated their livelihood, the walls and towers that protected, all really belonged to God. They were just borrowing them. They started to think it could last forever. They started to think that stuff really belonged to them. That's when the trouble started. They should have kept their boxes.

The same is true for each one of us. We have been given the precious gift of life. We get to exist in this world for a time. Many of us are blessed with other important gifts including houses, cars, clothes, and so much more. Some things we wear out and use up. However, anything that lasts will go to someone else. Even the very matter that makes up our bodies will, in time, return to the soil and become something else. It's not just my family. All of you are essentially living in a parsonage, too. One day, you'll get the call from the great bishop in the sky and others will take your place in the vineyard of the Lord.

It reminded me of a show on the History Channel called "Ice Road Truckers." If you remember, in that show, truck drivers in Alaska drive over a makeshift road on ice. Apart from the usual stress of trucking – deadlines and fuel prices – they also have to worry about the ice cracking. Many of the drivers said they do not buckle their seatbelt and they ride with one hand on the wheel and the other on the door handle. They have

to do their job, but they have to be ready to hop out at any time. They could teach those tenants a lesson. Getting too comfortable can prove fatal.

How do we live with the knowledge that our presence here is temporary? I think it teaches us two things. One is to think about the impact we have on earth. What world will we leave to our children and grandchildren? There's a parable that says society is at its best when the old people plant trees knowing that someone else will sit under the shade. I've heard another proverb that says the problem with society is that we think we inherit things from our parents. In reality, we are borrowing them from our children. The parable of the tenants reminds us to take care of the vineyard because it's not ours to begin with, and one day someone else will need it.

The other great lesson is to remember always that our home is in the Kingdom. We are sojourning here for a time. In the end, we will see Jesus face to face in heaven or in the resurrection, depending on how you like to describe it. I say to store your boxes in the attic. Jesus says to store up treasures in heaven. There is a joy in settling in. There is a joy in putting down roots. However, as we do so, we need to remember our citizenship is in heaven and keep our loyalty there above earthly things. As some of our evangelical friends are fond of saying, remember you are in the world and not of it. However, even that attitude has its risks.

If I'm being honest, friends, I'm having the opposite problem. Ever since my son died, it's been hard to stay invested in the world at all. I have this feeling that I'm in the wrong timeline. There's another timeline out there where none of this happened and Sam is still alive. It's tempting to say, "that's the real timeline. Who cares what happens in this one?!" I also find myself thinking about the afterlife a lot more. I think about the long years stretched ahead of me, missing him, and they can seem like such a burden. Paul says that our citizenship is in heaven and we await our savior from there. Again, if I'm being honest, that's not the voice I most look forward to hearing, and I'm impatient.

That's the other side of this parable of the tenants. All we own is really God's. One day, we will go to be with God and this vineyard will pass to new occupants. We should remember that and live accordingly. However, we are here now. This is our season in the vineyard of life. Our mission is to tend to it. There is joy in our mission. There is joy in my life, too. The joy of my wife and child, the joy of my calling to minister in the church, the joy of friends and community, the joy of God's creation around me. The boxes are in the attic, but life goes on downstairs. Use the gifts God has given you as God intends. Care for them so you're ready to pass them on. Live both in the present and in the future.

We've talked about a lot of ideas in this sermon, so let's sew it all up. First, some passages in our gospels were written at a time of conflict between early Christians and their Jewish neighbors. Don't let those passages push you to an anti-Semitic theology.

Secondly, the spirit can still talk to us through these passages, if we're willing to get creative. Third, remember that our time and treasures are on loan from God. Use them wisely and pass them on in good order. Finally, maintain balance between our future hope and our present calling. Don't choose either. Embrace a, "both-and," approach.

There's no better place to see past, present, and future rolled into one than in the sacrament of Holy Communion. As we gather at this table, we spiritually gather with all those who have ever eaten of it, all those eating of it today around the world, and all those who will eat of it in the future. Including Sam. **Amen.**