

Sermon | Indigenous Peoples' Sunday
Matthew 21:33-46 | The Rev. Barnabas Pusnur | October 8, 2023

We gather in our Sunday worship this morning to remember, honor, and celebrate the indigenous people of this nation. We remind ourselves that we live and thrive on the lands that once belonged to the native people. We acknowledge the mistreatment and exploitation they faced. And we seek to work towards justice and restoration.

When the first European settlers came, they assumed they were divinely ordained to colonize and extend the Christian kingdom into new lands. And in this establishment of the kingdom, they saw the natives as those of less or no worth. The settler's religion told them that the natives did not belong. The natives had no place. They equated God's realm with the Christian colonization project.

But the vision of the realm of God is bigger than any one of us can imagine. Who truly belongs to this realm? Is it a certain national group, a certain ethnic group, or a certain religious group? Throughout history different people groups have erred in assuming that God's realm is exclusively limited to them alone. They have assumed that they alone belong.

Today's Gospel challenges such assumptions. Jesus tells a set of three parables in the context of today's reading. The parable we heard this morning is the second parable in this set. Each of these three parables is about the kingdom of God. But these parables are not simply about what the kingdom of God is, instead they are about who is in this kingdom. Or about who truly belongs to this just and righteous realm.

The traditional answer was: well, of course it is the righteous who will enter this righteous realm. And who is more righteous than the religious leaders whose task was to lead the community in righteousness. The more holy one's title and role, the greater was the expectation that 'to such as these belongs the kingdom of God'.

But these three parables are a challenge to such deep-rooted assumptions and uncritical expectations. These parables instead force the hearer to open oneself to ways one never imagined.

"What do you think?" asks Jesus in the first parable. "A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work in the vineyard today.' He answered, 'I will not,' but later he changed his mind and went. The father went to the second and said the same, and he answered, 'I go, sir,' but he did not go. Which of the two did the will of his father?"

If for a moment we focus exclusively on just the verbal response of the two sons to the instruction "Son, go and work in the vineyard today" then the reply "I will not" from first son seems arrogant and rebellious! What rudeness! This son has ignored his father's instruction, he has rejected the invitation to work in the vineyard. If the analogy is to God inviting people to work in his kingdom, would the kingdom of God belong to such as these? Of course not! In contrast, the second son's response was polite and positive: "I go, sir." Such immediate and respectful response is what is needed. To those who respond to God's calling like this, belongs the kingdom of God. Or at least that's the expectation on the surface level.

But the parable is interested in something deeper. A superficial kind of response is not a good way to know who enters the righteous realm of God. When Jesus asks: "Which of the two did the will of his father?" the answer is obvious. The one who changed his mind and went to work. It is from those whom the people least expected, it was they who belonged to this kingdom. Not because they said the right things, but because they did the things that belong to the righteous realm of God. Jesus tells the religious leaders listening to him: "Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you." People who were presumed as lowly are going into this righteous realm. The parable forces us to question our

assumptions and perceptions of those we might consider unworthy.

In the second parable, a landowner plants a vineyard with a lot of love and care. The landowner makes the best possible provisions for this vineyard. He builds a fence around it, he digs a wine press in it, and even builds a watchtower there. This vineyard has all the best features, and the landowner leases it to tenants whom he trusts will work in the vineyard and give him the produce during harvest time. The landowner trusts them enough to leave to another country or region. They were an integral part of this project. Everything has been done right. Provisions have been made for a great harvest from the vineyard. If the parable stopped here, then the expectation was that this vineyard would truly flourish under these original tenants.

Yet, things don't go as planned. While the fence, wine press, and the watchtower did their job, the tenants turned evil and did everything they could including killing the workers and the son of the landowner, all to take over the vineyard.

And once again Jesus asks: "Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?" Were they still going to be part of this project any longer? No way! Not after what they had done. Those who were assumed to be fit for this project turned out not to be. They were supposed to be true to the trust that was placed on them. They had intentionally turned evil and selfish. And then Jesus tells the religious leaders hearing him: "the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom."

Could these new people once again be those who were least expected to be part of the kingdom project? Those deemed unworthy? Once again, the parable forces the hearer to open oneself. God is working beyond narrow understandings of which people belong in God's realm.

The final parable is about a king sending out invitations to his son's wedding banquet. One would expect the king would invite the royalty and the nobility to this son's

wedding. The expectation was that it was they who were supposed to be at this wedding party. They belonged there. But the parable continues that each of the invitees rejected the invitation. The king invited them a second time hoping they would change their mind, but they not only refused but ill-treated the messengers who brought the king's invitation. Once again, the expected did not happen. These nobility and royalty did not belong at the banquet. Instead, the king redirects his invitation to the commoners on the main streets. These commoners who were not thought to be worthy of the invitation to a royal banquet end up belonging there. They were the only ones in fact worthy of the invitation.

The first colonizers assumed that they belonged to God's kingdom and that the natives were expendable. But these parables force us to acknowledge that the realm of God is much broader and beyond narrow perceptions. Even as we live on the land of the indigenous people, we open ourselves, we see this righteous realm in ways that go beyond our expectations. We open ourselves to seek and learn from the sacred workings in our native siblings' communities. We seek the realm of righteousness in how the native people have persevered and sustained their communities despite immense challenges.

This morning we as an Episcopal church also acknowledge the error of our ways in how we treated the native people through our church's history. The Office of Indigenous Ministries of the Episcopal church works towards honoring, celebrating, and serving our native siblings.

May God give us open hearts and minds. May God expand our vision of God's realm. May God teach us to work towards justice for all God's people. Amen.