

Sermon for Proper 22A

The Text: Matthew 21:33-46

Holding up a mirror

One of the things you might enjoy about the Pentecost Season is that churchgoers spend a lot of time listening to Jesus' parables. Parables are a special way that Jesus teaches the people listening to him. Some are hard to unravel. Some make you squirm as you realise that he is speaking directly to you. Some seem to be able to speak one way to you and another way to someone else. That's the beauty of listening to Jesus' parables. There is always something new that you get out of them.

In a sense, Jesus uses the parables like a mirror. He did that last week to the chief priests and elders with his parable of the two sons working in the vineyard. And he does it today in the parable of the disobedient tenants. Sometimes it is hard to point out a person's wrongdoing. But using an indirect illustrative story, that is, a parable, is one way of helping someone see themselves being described so that they may see their wrongdoing.

In the Old Testament, God used the prophet Nathan to do exactly that. Up to that point, King David had refused to accept that he has done something wrong in committing adultery with Bathsheba. Instead of accepting his wrongdoing, he has Bathsheba's husband killed in battle so he could legally marry her. Nathan presented a parable before King David about a wealthy landowner who steals his neighbour's family lamb to present as a meal for his guests, even though he had plenty his own sheep. King David was furious at that rich landowner, yet not realising that it was himself being described as he pronounced a just judgment on that tyrant. Nathan declared to King David – YOU are the man. He used the parable as a mirror for King David to see his own actions which he could not see on his own.

It is easy for us to justify our lives before God by declaring ourselves righteous saying – I haven't killed anyone so I've never broken the 5th commandment. I haven't stolen anything. I haven't committed adultery. It's like the man who came to Jesus one day to ask how to inherit eternal life. Jesus said: You know the commandments: 'You shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall not give false testimony, you shall not defraud, honour your father and mother.' "Teacher," he declared, "all these I have kept since I was a boy." Jesus looked at him and loved him. "One thing you lack," he said. "Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me." Jesus knew his heart and what to present for him to look at himself, like looking in a mirror.

When writing his Catechisms, Martin Luther said that God also uses the Law as a mirror, in particular the 10 Commandments. He explained what is referred to as the three uses of the law with the purpose of leading us to the Gospel pronouncing the

forgiveness of our sins. He said that the First Use of the Law acts like a curb or a fence. It is the Law that is enacted by our governments to protect us. So, the commandments – you shall not steal – you shall not kill – these govern law and order. As citizens, we Christians follow them. If we break them, even though God forgives us, we are still punished by law. They are laws that God provides to give law and order and peaceful communities.

The Second Use of the Law is what is described as the Mirror. These are what we as Christians are to use to reflect on our lives. Like the young man claiming that he had kept all the commandments since he was a child, he was urged by Jesus to look again with Christ-like eyes. So when Jesus was asked what is the Greatest Commandment he answered – love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength – and love your neighbour as yourself. So as we reflect on the commandments and try to justify ourselves by saying – I haven't killed anyone so I haven't broken the fifth commandment, St John says in his First Letter (3:15) to look again: Anyone who hates a brother or sister is a murderer. Or if we say that we love God, John tells us to look again - If anyone says, "I love God," yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen. Jesus says, anyone who looks at a woman with lust has committed adultery in their heart. So in its spiritual and primary use, the law acts like a mirror to remind us of our need for remission of sin in Jesus.

Just like King David, we often try to avoid our guilt. We are very good at making excuses or justifying what we did and why we did it. The problem with that is we then avoid hearing the comforting word of God's forgiveness. But that is God's desire for us. Jesus said – God did not send his son into the world to condemn the world but to save the world through him. God wants to love us – to forgive us – to wrap his loving arms around us to let us know of his grace for us. We hear Jesus weep when we keep trying to deal with our guilt, by our own means, just like King David and the Pharisees did: "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing" says Jesus.

And we hear how heavy that guilt weighs upon us in King David's Psalm 32: Blessed is the one whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the one whose sin the Lord does not count against them and in whose spirit is no deceit. When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy on me; my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer. Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the Lord." And you forgave the guilt of my sin. So the purpose of the Second Use of the Law is to drive us to Jesus Christ and his grace and forgiveness. We call that Justification.

And once we have been comforted by the Gospel, the Law takes on a new role in the life of the Christian – we call that Sanctification. Knowing that we have been saved by Grace. Knowing that the Law can no longer condemn us because of Christ – we are now free to explore the gift of God's commandments to see how to live blessed lives. The reason I don't commit murder is not because I'm afraid of the

punishment of jail. The reason I don't commit murder is not because I'm afraid of God's judgment. Rather I don't commit murder because I love God with all my heart and because I love my neighbour.

And that's what Jesus is trying to teach through the parables. And it did the trick as Matthew points out: When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they realized that he was speaking about them. Now they are invited to repent and discover the freeing Gospel – but they unfortunately don't: They wanted to arrest him.

St Paul knows all too well our human tendency to avoid accusations of wrongdoing. He wrote: 'If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.'

Even though, according to Paul's own words, when it came to righteousness under the law he was blameless – he lacked knowing the grace of God because he had no need for it. But when he came to know Jesus Christ as his Lord, he found a different blessing from the law – not blamelessness, but forgiveness – as did King David. Not having a righteousness of his own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith.

If we try hard enough we can always find a good excuse or a reason for why we did something we shouldn't have. But God wants us to come to him, not so he can condemn us and make us feel guilty but so he can free us from the guilt and burden; that same burden and guilt King David experienced when his bones were crushed by the weight of his sin. Maybe we have to face an earthly punishment when we confess, but what a freeing gift it is, knowing that God does not condemn us. Imagine how free the woman caught in adultery felt when Jesus said that all her accusers were gone and that he did not condemn her either, but to go and not let sin enslave her anymore. Or the woman who washed Jesus' feet with her tears and dried them with her hair while righteous Simon the Pharisee ignored the needs of Jesus: And Jesus said to Simon: "Look at this woman kneeling here. When I entered your home, you didn't offer me water to wash the dust from my feet, but she has washed them with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You didn't greet me with a kiss, but from the time I first came in, she has not stopped kissing my feet. You neglected the courtesy of olive oil to anoint my head, but she has anointed my feet with rare perfume. I tell you, her sins—and they are many—have been forgiven, so she has shown me much love. But a person who is forgiven little shows only little love." And Jesus said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."

Let us not be afraid to come to Jesus and bring all our baggage with us. God sent his son into the world, not to condemn the world but to save the world through him. Go in peace – your faith has saved you.