Who Owns the Vineyard?*

My cousin Ed is a former Catholic priest who deeply influenced my life and thinking about God.

He preached at my ordination and had everyone put their hand on their own heads (like this!) as a way of saying that the priesthood isn't just here in the pulpit.

That you're all priests, charged with sacred duties by God.

As I was ordained, so was everyone else there!

So are all of you here, as St. Peter plainly says: "you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood…"

What are the implications of you all being priests?

Well, to start with, it changes everything when it comes to encountering life.

How we treat the environment and other living things, who we invite, who we exclude, is now seen through the lens of that most painful (and pointed) question that Jesus asks us today:

"Who owns the vineyard?"

Which in modern language translates as: "who owns the bounty of this world?"

The rich and the powerful say: “We do!”

Yet this is not a challenge just to the Elon Musks of the world.

It lands at my front door too.

Who owns my wealth?

What about my entitled privileges?

And yet, when long time undocumented members of our communities are kidnapped and deported, what’s my response?

As climate change continues to wreak havoc, what is our collective responsibility to address this problem?

When our own multinational corporations throw indigenous people off their land so we can have cheap bananas, then install repressive governments to maintain the injustice, how do we react when desperate people, victims of theft in our name, show up at our borders seeking refuge?

On this day of honoring St. Francis, how does the industrialized mass slaughter of animals measure up with being faithful stewards of creation?

Not to mention our love affair with guns, as school shootings become an “acceptable" part of life?

I have to say as I read today’s gospel lesson, I started to squirm.

Maybe you did too.

Because my gut says, of course: I own my personal wealth!

Of course, I am entitled to my privileges and peccadillos!

Of course, the second amendment enshrines my right to own as many guns as I want.

Of course, as a citizen of this country, my rights are far superior to the rights of non-citizens.

And yet, when I see my way of thinking through the lens of this parable, I'm on a direct collision course — with Jesus.

A collision that "my way of doing things" cannot survive.

This morning, Jesus confronts people who think just like I do with a story that leaves them hollering out:

"He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and lease the vineyard to others…!"

Who's the wretch?

I'm the wretch!

Because I'm so tightly wrapped up in, beholden to, and benefit from, the violence and self-sufficiency and justifications that my way of life promotes.

It's not just me.

Like the tenants in the vineyard, too many of us insist that we are owners, not tenants.

We too often water down the costly love of the gospel to create god — the cuddly mascot.

A god who adores us in our comforts — and who blesses our bigotries.

But that's not the God of Jesus.

Fydor Dostoevsky shines a light on the God of Jesus in his story entitled "A Lady of Little Faith."

In it, an elderly priest encourages a wealthy woman to take the risk of "active love" as she struggles with lifelong doubts and unbelief.

He says: "Strive to love your neighbor actively and tirelessly...

As you advance in love you'll grow surer of the reality of God and the new life that God promises."

She's not paying attention and instead simply goes on about her daydreams, as she fantasizes about a life serving the poor.

But these dreams are filled with the overwhelming fear that her sacrifices won't be met with the proper kind of gratitude, or the heartfelt thanks that she feels she so richly deserves.

Understanding this, the old priest—speaking kindly—peers directly into her eyes, and knowing her need to be in control, understanding her desire to be the center of attention, replies:

"I'm sorry.

I can say nothing more consoling to you.

For love in action is a harsh and dreadful thing compared with love in dreams." Laurel A. Dykstra, paraphrased.

In my train wreck with Jesus, something harsh and dreadful indeed happens.

My opinions, my wants, my best thinking, are crushed, ground to bits, by the stumbling block that is Jesus.

The crushing happens not because me and the other miserable wretches come to an awful end.

The crushing comes when I wake up to the fact that it's Jesus who comes to the awful end.

He comes to that awful end for us.

And for the whole wide world.

You can't face that truth — and not be crushed.

Crushed with gratitude — and shame — and relief.

Jesus gives himself over to be tortured and killed, and on the third day returns — not with revenge, but with the gift of forgiveness.

And as I stand there face to face with this gracious savior, the tight grip I have on my bags of money, clutching at my rights and my privileges, well, that grip begins to loosen.

As I stand in relief and gratitude before the true owner of all.

If everything I have is simply on loan from God, then the only thing we can do — is to share it — with anyone and everyone in need.

That's why Jesus such a stumbling block!

He's raining on my parade!

Because he takes us out of our naval gazing obsession with self — and moves us into relationship with folks who are weird or different — and sometimes smelly.

Jesus invites everyone to the greatest party ever thrown.

The only question is whether we'll say yes to the invite, because after all, it means associating with THOSE people!

This is what Paul's getting at when he says with utter confidence:

"For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may have a righteousness not of my own ....., but … through faith in Christ."

"Rubbish" in the Greek is pronounced: "skybala."

And yes, it means what you think it means!

In other words, "Paul trusts that once we accept that we are loved purely, openly and generously, perhaps we can then begin to love others in the same way.

No longer seeing people as objects to be exploited — but as beloved persons to be treasured.

Not as enemies fighting over scarce resources — but as siblings who celebrate abundance in harmony.

This is the heartbeat of the kingdom of God.

The heartbeat of caring for and loving each other-- today, and always!

How is this possible?

Because Jesus' death and resurrection are the pivot point of history.

The fulcrum on which God moves the destiny of the whole universe — toward the joy promised from the very beginning.

For Paul, nothing is the same once he encounters Jesus; crucified and risen, just as nothing can be same for us.

Because we live in the grace of God NOW, this moment IS the hour of our salvation; so let us be glad and rejoice!

And there is one more thing.

We discover that life — isn't about "us" after all.

That, in fact, life never was about us.

Instead, it's all about God.

It's about God's marvelous truth that love is stronger than hate.

That life is stronger than death.

That God's future is deeper and more satisfying than either the past we've created — or the future we deserve.

Because the gospel is true, “we are free to treat others as Christ does.

All because the vineyard, this world, our country, my wallet — never belonged to me in the first place.” David Lose, paraphrased.

It all belongs, to God.

So go, you priests of God, and live out your calling!

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