

A Love Story?

March 3, 2013

Luke 20:9-19

*He began to tell the people this parable: "A man planted a vineyard, and leased it to tenants, and went to another country for a long time. When the season came, he sent a slave to the tenants in order that they might give him his share of the produce of the vineyard; but the tenants beat him and sent him away empty-handed. Next he sent another slave; that one also they beat and insulted and sent away empty-handed. And he sent still a third; this one also they wounded and threw out. Then the owner of the vineyard said, 'What shall I do? I will send my beloved son; perhaps they will respect him.' But when the tenants saw him, they discussed it among themselves and said, 'This is the heir; let us kill him so that the inheritance may be ours.' So they threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. What then will the owner of the vineyard do to them? He will come and destroy those tenants and give the vineyard to others." When they heard this, they said, "Heaven forbid!" But he looked at them and said, "What then does this text mean: 'The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone'? Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls." When the scribes and chief priests realized that he had told this parable against them, they wanted to lay hands on him at that very hour, but they feared the people.*

When I go to yoga class on Friday mornings I try to go with an open mind. But it always seems like there is some irritation. Usually it is Eric's spin class that meets over the yoga room. He cranks up his music and yells over the top of it making it almost impossible to hear our instructor, let alone relax. But that wasn't my problem on Friday. Robin, our instructor, put on some awful Brazilian CD that sounded more sleezy than meditative. Then she started moving fast from one pose to the next – lunge – to warrior 2 – to a twist – then a plank (I hate planks) – up dog to down dog and then the other side. Over and over again. Every time we started the progression over the voice in my head got crankier and crankier. I could see others were struggling to keep up. I wanted to lead a rebellion. Slow down! Change this awful music! Do something different! I don't like this! I don't want to do this! Grrrrr!!!!

Even though you are supposed to be focused on your breathing and poses my mind was off in other directions. I was having a conversation with myself about the fact that I was being resistant and I needed to simply submit and take instruction. I wondered why that was so hard for me. Why was I so quick to take it out on Robin when I was the one with the bad attitude?

The irony is that yoga is about flexibility and openness...yeah right...

Our Christian walk is also about flexibility and openness. So many of our songs and prayers speak to our need to be shaped and molded by God. "Have Thine Own Way, Lord!" we sing. Shape us, stretch us, fill us, use us. We are to be as soft and flexible as a lump of clay in God's hands...and yet we resist. Maybe it is just human nature to not want to be told what to do.

There is a book about parenting adolescents titled, "Get Out of My Life! But First, Could You Drop Me and Cheryl Off At the Mall?" That could be the title of my spiritual life. Sometimes I do not want to bend in ways that God wants me to do. Sometimes there are messes I do not want to clean up. There are some behaviors I think are perfectly fine. Why do I have to be putty in

God's hands? Like a child I resist and rebel against giving God any authority in my life – but you can sure bet that I expect God to be there when I need something.

I know I am especially resistant when I have to confront sin in my own life. All my defenses come up. “I don't do that. I didn't mean to do that. He made me do that. This is how my parents did that. Everybody does that...” Why is it so hard to say, “I know I do that – God help me to fix that!”

I suspect I am not alone.

The second half of the Old Testament contains the books of the prophets. A few of their names might sound familiar to you; Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos, Micah, to name a few. Prophets are the truth tellers of scripture. Prophets were and are sent by God to point out sin. They would cry out in the streets or bang their drums saying, “Don't you see what you are doing? Look how far you have strayed!” It wasn't a very fun job and most of them got rejected. Some people think prophets had the ability to see into the future but their real gift was to see the present with God's eyes. What looked like future telling was their ability to see and name what was going to happen if God's people didn't change their ways and remember they were God's people. It was easier for most folks to beat up the prophet rather than see the error of their ways.

The book of the prophet Hosea is one of the saddest books you will ever read. Hosea is instructed by God to marry a promiscuous woman named, Gomer. Hosea loves Gomer but she continues to betray him, time and time again. He divorces her, but then seeks her out again and has to buy her out of slavery. They have three children, although Hosea isn't even sure the third one is his. Hosea is faithful in his covenant with Gomer while Gomer is out doing her own thing.

As you read this tragic tale you find yourself pleading with Gomer to wake up and see how she is hurting Hosea and destroying her life. And then you realize that this story is about God's love for God's resistant, sometimes rebellious people. The Israelites Hosea was confronted were worshipping idols and had all but forgotten God, but God had not forgotten them. In the end their kingdom collapsed and they asked “where is God?”

In this story from Hosea we encounter God as patient, steadfast, and loving. We come to appreciate what God has to put up with in loving us so dearly. God is faithful. We are not. And yet God reaches out again and again and again. Anyone who has loved a rebellious child understands.

I am convinced that it is this understanding of God that we need to bring to our scripture reading for today. This parable in Luke seems to tell the same story but in a much different way. A man owned a vineyard and leased it out to tenants and then was gone for a long time. When the vineyard started to produce the owner sent a servant to collect on the lease. The tenants beat up the servant and sent him home empty-handed. So the owner sent another servant and the same thing happened. The owner sent a third servant and the same thing happened. So the owner says to himself, “What shall I do? I will send my beloved son; perhaps they will respect him.”

It is that word “perhaps” that sounds almost hopeful – hopeful that this story will end with “and they all lived happily ever after.” “Perhaps,” .....can you hear the longing and love in that one word? This landowner is willing to try again and this time the landowner is willing to send his son but even the son is rejected.

Then tenants want the vineyard for themselves so they decide to kill the son thinking they can inherit the land if the only heir is dead. Their greed consumes them to the point of violence and murder. What choice does the landowner have but to get new tenants to tend the vineyard? What more could he have done? There was no one left to send...

I could speak for days on this one parable. It is considered one of the most challenging parables to understand...but today, for your sake, it is enough to consider that one word, “perhaps.” God does not give up on us, as resistant and rebellious as we may be. Nor does God rescue us from the consequences when we continue down a rebellious path, refusing to take a look at ourselves and possibly repent. God sent the prophets. God sent Jesus. They all met with resistance and rejection by those who had become so hard they were no longer able to be shaped by God.

When we start getting stiff, inflexible, and stubborn – what can God do with us? When we cease to care what God wants and yet expect God to care about what we want, what can God do with us? For too many of us, we have to be completely broken before we even think about God.

And when we do think about God, what do we think. Are we thinking of a white-bearded judge in the sky, ready to punish, throwing down silly rules, making demands? Can we see instead, God longing for us? Can we see God as reaching down to us...trying again and again to redeem us? Can we imagine God saying, “Perhaps...?”

I came home from yoga class and Dave asked me, “So did you go with the flow?” (Dave knows the class is called yoga flow.) “Grrrrr....” was all I could say.

God’s spirit and love has a flow...it flows toward love, and service, and humility, and generosity. God’s spirit has a flow and it flows toward peace, and patience and kindness. God’s spirit has a flow and it flows toward forgiveness, and joy, and mercy. Life is so much better when we stop resisting God’s current and go with the flow...Life is so much better when we finally figure out that God is for us, not against us. Amen.