

To Heir is Human

A sermon preached by
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Text:
Matthew 21:33-46

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[Jesus said] “Listen to another parable. There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a wine press in it, and built a watchtower. Then he leased it to tenants and went to another country.³⁴ When the harvest time had come, he sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his produce.³⁵ But the tenants seized his slaves and beat one, killed another, and stoned another.³⁶ Again he sent other slaves, more than the first; and they treated them in the same way.³⁷ Finally he sent his son to them, saying, ‘They will respect my son.’³⁸ But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, ‘This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance.’³⁹ So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him.⁴⁰ Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?”⁴¹ They said to [Jesus], “He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the harvest time.”⁴² Jesus said to them, “Have you never read in the scriptures: ‘The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord’s doing, and it is amazing in our eyes’?”⁴³ Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom.⁴⁴ The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls.”⁴⁵ When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they realized that he was speaking about them.⁴⁶ They wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowds, because they regarded him as a prophet.

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It is my Irrevocable Will, and that for Reasons best known to myself, that my Eldest Son [Johannes Heilman] John Hallman be Disinherited from any part Whatsoever of any Estate Real and Personal and he is and shall be forever Disinherited from all and every part, save one English Shilling which shall be paid unto him by my Executor hereafter mentioned within Ten Days from the Day of my Decease.

It is the second clause, after first “recommending my soul to God,” from the Last Will & Testament of my great-great-great-great-great-great-great grandfather, Anton Heilman, probated in Philadelphia on August 3, 1759. This past summer I did a lot of family history research on my mother’s side of my family and I’ve been able to fill in some gaps in the work I’d previously done and I’ve discovered some new information. The American patriarch of my mom’s family, Anton, is one of those people I have known about but this summer I found some clarity as to who he was. In his will, Anton was generous to each of his and his wife, Maria Salome’s, children save one

Anton and Maria and at least a few of their 8 children immigrated to America from Germany circa 1719 on the second trip of the *Concord*, the ship that was for German immigrants what the *Mayflower* was for the English. They settled in Skippack, PA, north of Germantown and the earliest German settlements.

What has really confounded me is – and I have not been able to find an answer – and I may never be able to find an answer – what prompted Anton to disinherit Johannes? Maria Salome had died several years earlier in 1745. Anton decided to disinherit his eldest son, his first born, his child, his heir – the one to whom everything should have passed at the death of the patriarch.

Was it because he moved away from the homestead? But he only moved to Worcester Township, 4 miles away. Was it because he gave up farming the family business? Maybe, but he established

another farm which would have meant more prosperity for the Heilmans. Was there marital strife that caused anger in the father? Probably won't ever know. Did Johannes simply step on his father's toes in some insignificant way? That could very well be the case – people will hold a grudge beyond the grave for the most menial of things. Who knows?

“For reasons best known to me,” wrote Anton. And that's true. Maybe Johannes knew – maybe. Maybe the other children knew. Maybe the community knew. But I may never know.

Heirs. Who is to inherit what we have accumulated in this life? Who “gets” what we leave behind when we depart this world? Who inherits?

There are two things that bother me about Jesus' parable that includes in it the concept of inheritance that we've heard this morning. First, if these nasty tenants captured and killed the slaves that the landowner sent to collect the rent, and then they seized and killed the next set of slaves he sent, why in God's name did he send his son? What made the landowner believe that his *son* would succeed, would be safe, where the slaves hadn't? What made him believe that his son would survive this confrontation with the tenants? Did he not *like* the son? Or was he just not thinking clearly? Seems like an irrational decision to me.

And second, what make the tenants believe that if they killed the son, they (the tenants) would become the heirs? That they would inherit the land of the owner whose slaves and son they have just murdered? I don't get it.

My biblical scholar friend says he has the explanation. The dad sent the son because he thinks the son will get more respect simply because of who he is. The tenants assume they'll inherit because the owner is an absentee landlord and they have actual possession of the land. But I don't know. It just seems pretty screwy to me.

And I suspect that it's part of what we're supposed to get out of this parable.

The thing is, inheritance is never as clean as you might expect it to be – nor is God's kingdom.

I know that when I was practicing law, I was involved in several family disputes where the family was fighting about seemingly minor things. Who gets mom's Limoges porcelain ware? Who gets the horse? Who gets dad's cufflinks? It can get a bit wild at times and the case law is endless and ancient where families quarrel over the tiniest of things.

Did my family patriarch simply dislike the tone his son used with him in some exchange they had in the barn one afternoon so he disinherited him? When I began to think about just what that means – how serious a statement that is in 1759 when a family is just getting settled in a new land 4,000 miles from the security of the country that was once your home. He must not have done it without serious deliberation. Or did he? How rash a decision it might have been to cut his son out of his will. And, I assume, he had pushed him out of his life even earlier than when his will was read.

In her new novel, *If Sons Then Heirs*, Philadelphia author Loreen Cary tells the story of an African-American family, part of which migrated north to Philadelphia from South Carolina during the Second Great Migration of the 1940s-1970s. Grandmother Selma remained the matriarch of the family living on the family farm, trying her best to raise the children and grandchildren that have come her way when they needed help. And, more importantly she thinks, protecting the “heir property” that her husband King Needham had earned from the original owners, who were white.

Heir property is that which is owned by all of the heirs of a person who didn't divide it before death and died without having divided it in a will. It was a common practice in the south among African-

Americans to have land owned by not just an individual but an entire family. And often it was difficult to find a deed or other proof of ownership which made it much easier for a developer – a white developer – to claim ownership when a member of that family dies. Or the developer makes a deal with one member of the family and becomes part of the difficult puzzle in dividing property among the numerous ancestors that can come from one single couple by the time that couple dies. Imagine if you have 5 children and they each have 5 children and they each have 5 children while you are still alive. At your death, the interest in your real estate might have to be divided among 125 great grandchildren.

“Heir property’s vulnerability,” writes Cary, “was this:”

... any heir – or anyone who bought out an heir, say, a developer – could go to a judge and force a sale. The family had ten days in which to buy out the shareholder who wanted to sell, and then, if he would not sell, another month before a general sale. A poor extended family that was scraping by on the heir property would be up against the developer’s investors. Time and again, the investors offered more money than the family could match.

Such is another White privilege, racist vestige of slavery and Jim Crow laws.

In the novel, though, the family is able to overcome their internal conflicts and openly deal with the ghosts of the past that haunt them and hold them down and they are able to legally address the property issues and back down the developers who are trying to take the family’s land.

But the novel is about more than real estate. It’s about the importance of family relationships, it’s about the determination it takes to support each other, and it’s about realizing that family is about more than biological connection. Without trying to explain

the full web of relationships in the book, let me describe it like this. King Needham married Selma who has raised the children from his first marriage – Jewell and Jones. Their son Bobo has spent most of his life in and out of jail; Bobo’s daughter, Jewell, had abandoned her young son, Rayne, back to South Carolina to be raised by grandmother Selma; Rayne is now a grown man with a successful construction company and living in West Philadelphia. Jewell has gotten her life together and is now married to a white man, Jack; Selma knows she is getting toward the end of her life and she wants Rayne to help save the farm. Jack, Jewell’s husband who is dying from cancer, toward the resolution of the story as relationships are being repaired, says that he considers himself a “cultural Christian” much like some non-religious Jews consider themselves cultural Jews:

[T]his is about life and death, isn’t it? Everything we’ve been talking about tonight. Jonesey in the army killing Japanese; somebody here killing King, whom Jones probably loved a much as his sister did. My wife running away from the all, trying to kill herself. Her father doing God knows what, spending half his life in prison. And me with cancer, breathing through a tube ... Christianity is obsessed by death. I’m a cultural Christian because given the pervasiveness of death in life, a dead-human-turned-eternal-advocate does seem like an appropriate response.

I think that’s a bit of what’s going on in Jesus’ parable as well. It’s a reminder to us that God’s kingdom is messy because it’s about relationships more than it’s about ownership, it’s about the life and death that pervades our life; it’s about the long distance relationship that at times it seems like we have with God when indeed that relationship is supposed to be right here in front of us.

The title of Loreen Cary’s book comes from Paul’s Letter to the Galatians: “So, then, you are no longer a slave, but rather a son; and if you are a son, you are also an heir by God’s act of

adoption.” (Galatians 4:7) If sons, then heirs. If you have connected yourself to Jesus as a follower, then you are an adopted child of God’s child and if, therefore adopted, you are an heir to whatever God has to offer. That’s a powerful way to understand the meaning of being a follower of Jesus.

What about the parable? If these wicked tenants wanted to be heirs of the landowner, maybe they should have accepted the son who the landowner sent rather than kill him. Maybe they should have gotten to know the son who would have inherited the vineyard at his father’s ultimate death. Maybe they should have negotiated a deal with the son that they might work to buy out his ownership since it was in a different country from where the owner-family lived and must have been hard for the owner to manage.

But no. They chose to kill both sets of emissaries the owner sent and even kill the son and destroy any chance that they might have had of negotiating a deal.

Is it possible that Jesus’ parable is wanting us to learn to love one another? Nah. Or wait a minute ... I think I’ve heard of that concept before ...

If you learn to love one another – learn how to repair the relationships that are strained and toxic – learn to accept your adoption into Jesus’ family – then maybe – just maybe – you can accept the inheritance that comes along with it.

My daughter Lacey turned 21 last week. Most of you know that she is in China this semester and is headed to Australia next semester. Last year she was in Taiwan, Thailand, India and Turkey. The first year of her global studies program the students studied in Costa Rica, though Lacey wasn’t in the program that year. What I have found most remarkable about this practical, cultural immersion approach to education is what the school explains as its foundation. Global College at Long Island University is based on a concept first developed by George

Nicklin, a Quaker who served in Germany in WWII. As one of few survivors of his combat unit, he decided that peaceful coexistence is the only way that we are going to survive in this world. It’s better to learn about one another than kill one another.

On World Communion Sunday that might be a good lesson for us to hear. Christians all over the world are today participating at this table as together we remind ourselves that we truly are all part of one body in Christ, one extended family. We take this moment to remind ourselves and each other that we are heirs of the same family and that together we inherit all that God has for us.

Stanley Hauerwas, who Time Magazine named in 2001 as the “best theologian in America,” once uttered his impassioned appeal: “A modest proposal for peace, Christians should stop killing other Christians.” If we start there, don’t we begin to realize the message of Jesus? And if we grow it beyond there so that we no longer kill Jews or Muslims or Buddhists or Sikhs or whoever else, pretty soon we’re not killing anyone. What a concept!

One might assume that the heirs of a God who loves would love one another – or, at a minimum, learn to coexist.

My family tree now has 1,557 people in it from about 1200 AD to the present – and I know that in reality it is multiple times that. Suppose we discovered an acre of land that was left un-transferred in about 1300 AD and whatever part of that 1,557 people are living had to divide that acre of land between them. Could we do it? I have my doubts that we could even find everyone let alone get them to agree to how the land should be divided. And might we even be fighting over it? And, God forbid, killing over that acre of land?

Yet we are heirs, aren’t we? Aren’t we all – all of humanity – heirs of the same God? If we believe that there is only one God and that we are God’s children, then absolutely yes we are heirs.

“This is about life and death, isn’t it?,” asks Jack in Loreen Cary’s novel, Jack who is staring imminent death in the face. “This is about life and death ...”

Maybe Jesus wants us to remember that when he tells us this parable. It’s about life and death – this world, our relationships, our decisions, our love, our life. It’s all about life and death – our inheritance as heirs. It’s all about life and death and we better learn how to live before we die. To heir is human.

Amen.