Pentecost 18

Blacksburg-Radford ELCA Fellowship, Rev. Monica Weber

Oct 4, 2020

*Good morning! I’m Rev. Monica Weber, blessed to pastor the good people of Luther Memorial Lutheran Church in Blacksburg. I serve on the Virginia Synod Council, and participate in the Synod’s Tapestry group to promote diversity and inclusivity.*

*I’m also blessed to reflect on God’s Word with you today: we’ve faced so many struggles in 2020, but despite the tragedies of the pandemic, the terrors of racial injustice and the heartbreak of divisive politics, we, the people of God, give thanks that 50 years ago, the first Lutheran woman was ordained; 40 years ago, the first Lutheran woman of color was ordained; and 10 years ago, the ELCA first ordained our LGBTQIA+ siblings. Thanks be to God that the Spirit tore down those walls!*

*Friends, let’s pray together: God, our Creator, you fashion us in your image and claim us as your beloved children; you equip and empower us by your Holy Spirit. Make us mindful that we serve you, Lord God. Lead us from the temptation to believe that we own your Creation; that we possess the keys to your Kingdom; or that we can bend your will to ours. Stir us to be humble, like Jesus, who gave himself to die for the whole world, in pure love,* Amen.

**The Holy Gospel according to Matthew (21:33-46)** (Glory to you, O Lord)

33 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 watch-tower. Then he leased it to tenants and went to another country. 34When the harvest time had come, he sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his produce. 35But the tenants seized his slaves and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. 36Again he sent other slaves, more than the first; and they treated them in the same way. 37Finally he sent his son to them, saying, “They will respect my son.” 38But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, “This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance.” 39So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him. 40Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?’ 41They said to him, ‘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”?   
43Therefore 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. 44The 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. 46They wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowds, because they regarded him as a prophet.

**This is the Gospel of our Lord.** (Praise to you O Christ)

It’s the first Sunday in October, that month with a special place in the hearts of we who worship God as Lutheran Christians: on October 31, 1517, Martin Luther nailed his 95 Theses to the door of Wittenberg Castle church, protesting the corruption of the papal curia and its neglect of God’s people. Luther never wanted to split from the Roman Catholic church, merely reform it…but he inadvertently created a new branch of Christianity. Luther and his fellow Reformers often disagreed over doctrine, but they were all passionate in their accusation that the Church had become an institution of entitlement; an institution that restricted—and dictated—the grace of God.

This sense of entitlement is what Jesus warns against in today’s Gospel. Dr. Brent Driggers, Professor of New Testament at Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary, highlights Jesus’ key message: human beings should never claim ownership of God’s ministry, and we must never confuse our service with entitlement.[[1]](#footnote-1)

The tenants in Jesus’ parable are so focused on harvesting a high yield from the vineyard, they forget that the vineyard isn’t theirs. They confuse their participation in the landowner’s business with ownership of a harvest that doesn’t belong to them. These tenants believe that their service in the vineyard entitles them to control it; they are blind to the truth that the owner has entrusted them with the vineyard to serve him, not themselves.[[2]](#footnote-2)

The Pharisees hear Jesus’ parable as a criticism of their religious authority. Instead of receiving Jesus’ message as instruction for doing God’s will, they reject Jesus altogether, judging him as a blasphemer who threatens to steal the souls they’ve faithfully tended. Their inflated opinion of themselves makes the Pharisees blind to God’s will, fracturing their trust with God. Like the tenants in the parable, the Pharisees have pursued *their own* goals, instead of obeying God’s desire for Creation; they’ve confused their *leadership* of God’s people with power *over* those people.[[3]](#footnote-3) But we shouldn’t be too hard on the Pharisees, because religious folks across time have behaved in this same way.

God entrusts Christ’s Church to us for worship and service, but we’ve often appropriated the Church in the belief that we own it. Instead of laboring for the Church to relieve human suffering, we often demand that the Church serve *us*; we want the Church to align with *our* personal preferences, and meet *our* expectations! In our quest for power and control over Christ’s Church, we’ve ignored God’s Holy Spirit of change, and the commands of Jesus; our misguided sense of ownership has often led us to dictate *who* may or may not have access to God, and God’s grace.

We’ve built walls of entitlement around Christ’s Church to keep out the people we judge to be undesirable, but in the Gospels, Jesus demonstrates over and over that no one is undesirable to God. Yet we work hard to keep out ‘those sinners,’ hoping God won’t judge *us* by association. The walls go up, God’s people are excluded, and humiliated. Then we wonder why no one wants to join the institution we have built for ourselves…

In the course of two thousand years, the Church in its entitlement has sinfully excluded thousands of “undesirables” because of their gender, their sexuality, skin color, ethnicity, or their social class. The Church has withheld God’s holy rites and sacraments from faithful believers because they are divorced, or because they committed suicide, or because they weren’t baptized ‘the right way,’ or for a whole host of reasons invented so we could judge, exclude and punish the very people God already loves and forgives.

Martin Luther was adamant that it is Jesus’ pure sacrifice of love on the cross, not our works or belief, that brings us into God’s grace. Yet we post-Reformation Christians have participated in some of the same restrictive, punitive behaviors and attitudes that Luther and his contemporaries protested; and even more tragically, we have worshiped an institution more than we worship Jesus.

As the bricks of our self-righteousness entitlement stack higher and higher to protect our beloved traditions and preferences, they block our view of God at work in the world. In that narrow focus on ourselves, our sense of entitlement clips the wings of God’s Spirit; we behave like the Pharisees and the tenants in the vineyard, murdering every new idea and rejecting Jesus’ command to accompany and minister to all people, in unconditional love.

As a young Lutheran girl, I crashed head-first into one of those restrictive walls built by the keepers of the Church. In 1972, my family moved to Beaumont, Texas and we joined Bethlehem Lutheran Church. The LCA and ALC Lutheran bodies had ordained a woman pastor in 1970, but Bethlehem Lutheran’s council president made it clear that he didn’t approve. One Sunday after worship, he asked my younger brother to serve as an acolyte; I stood next to my brother, so I volunteered to be an acolyte, too.

The man scowled at me, ignored my offer, and walked away. My pride was wounded, but I asked my elderly pastor if I could be an acolyte with my brother. He patted me on the head, and said, “Oh dear Monica, girls *can’t* be acolytes.” Well… the word ‘can’t’ has never been part of my vocabulary: “Pastor,” I asked, “*Why* can’t girls be acolytes?”

Bless Reverend C.A. Woytek: he’d been a pastor for 45 years, so he paused, stared toward heaven, then said with a deep sigh, “Girls can’t be acolytes *because the Church says so.*” *Ah*… an answer from On High. My spirit was crushed: I was summarily dismissed from serving the Church, just for being a *girl*. At home, I badgered my mother. “But it’s not my fault: God *made* me a girl,” I said. “And does God really care whether acolytes are boys or girls?” Now, my mom was raised Roman Catholic, so she knew from experience that this was a battle I probably couldn’t win. She hugged me tightly and said, “Girls can serve God in other ways. You can help me wash the communion cups.”

*Wow*: boys get to light candles and assist in worship; girls get to wash the dishes. The next Sunday was painful as I watched my brother process into the sanctuary and light the altar candles. I was proud of him, but I also felt ashamed: if God created me, why was I unworthy to serve God?

Apparently, other girls protested, because a few months later, Pastor Woytek announced that the church council voted—by a slim margin—to permit girl acolytes. The Holy Spirit had intervened and broken down a wall, so I signed up. When my turn came to light those altar candles, a deep joy moved through me, because I felt that God had seen me; I felt affirmed as the exact person God created me to be, just as I am, a *girl*! I felt accepted, and included, and that what I had to offer was of value to God, and the Church. Being a girl acolyte was the first step in my call from God to ordained ministry, many years later.

That experience is evidence that the Holy Spirit of God is a powerful force of change to tear down walls, especially in the Church, when we humans forget that we serve God, not ourselves. That experience has also helps me reach out to others who have been excluded, ignored, dismissed or wounded by the Church or its members, to reassure the outcasts and those so-called ‘undesirables’ that all God’s children deserve equal welcome, equal opportunities and equal respect, because they’ve already received God’s love and grace.

Thankfully, the ELCA has seen, affirmed and included many who were formerly excluded: the Spirit destroyed the walls of entitlement in this Church that restricted the ordination of women; women of color; and our LGBTQIA+ siblings. Thanks be to God for that. But there are many more barriers to destroy.

There are many less obvious walls to be torn down: if we insist that only traditional European Christmas carols should be sung in Christmas Eve worship, we exclude the vibrant traditions of our African-American and Latinx Lutheran siblings: their beautiful carols are included the ELW hymnal, so shouldn’t we sing them, too? Why does it take an ordained woman of color between 3-6 years to receive a call to an ELCA congregation, when hundreds of pulpits in the ELCA stand empty? Why do many women pastors in the ELCA typically earn less than our male colleagues, often compensated below Synod salary guidelines?

As Rev. Lenny Duncan says, when we spend more money to restore a stained-glass window than we donate to feed the hungry, we proclaim our entitlement, not the love of Christ.[[4]](#footnote-4) We dilute God’s inclusive hospitality if we claim to embrace everyone, but object to a rainbow flag at church because it might offend someone. We proclaim our entitlement, not the love of Christ, if we won’t join the dialogue on systemic racism, or work for social justice.

We must shift our attitude of ownership and entitlement: Christ’s Church does not belong to us. God has entrusted the Church to us to be a place of welcome, embrace and comfort where all God’s people may flourish. There’s no question the Church is changing, and I believe that the Spirit of God is stirring these changes, because we have become too complacent, too comfortable, and too self-righteous. The Spirit has shaken us out of our comfort zone: despite a global pandemic, this Fellowship of congregations has partnered to conduct life-changing ministry, doing God’s work with our hands to relieve human suffering in new ways that we might never have imagined, if we’d stayed behind our walls of tradition. God has breathed new life into our congregations even though we can’t gather in person: what a miracle that is!

In the water and Spirit of holy baptism, God gives us all new life that sets us apart to be the vine of Christ Jesus, so we may grow and bear fruit, spreading Jesus’ message of love and forgiveness. Being set apart by God also means that we bear the responsibility to never confuse God’s will, with ours.

The next time you’re tempted to ‘control’ Christ’s Church, or control another person, or control God’s Creation, take a deep breath and a step back. Remember that God has claimed you as a beloved, baptized child. You are already forgiven, forever. God has already given you the gift of eternal life with Jesus. And remember that God’s will is always accomplished, with or without you. Trust the Holy Spirit to harvest God’s holy vineyard, and don’t worry about who comes in or goes out…no one can steal your share of God’s grace. Thanks be to God, **Amen!**

1. Commentary on Matthew 21:33-46, Dr. Brent Driggers, 2008, accessed 9.10.2020, www.workingpreacher.com [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Rev. Lenny Duncan, 2020 Visiting Theologian Webinar, Sept. 12, 2020. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)