

**ALL GOD'S**  
*Sermon for Pentecost 18A-Mt. 21:33-46, Phil. 3:4b-14*  
LPC, 10/8/17

After hearing the word “exceptionalism” several times in public discourse recently, I decided to look it up. The definition I found in The Free Dictionary online, is that “exceptionalism,” when used in the context of discussing government, politics or diplomacy, is “an attitude to other countries, cultures, etc based on the idea of being quite distinct from, and often superior to, them in vital ways.”

My purpose today is not to address American exceptionalism specifically. I will leave it to others to do that. My concern is to understand the Holy Scriptures, and I think the concept of exceptionalism is relevant to what Matthew presents in today’s Gospel lesson, and indeed, has been presenting in the Gospel lessons for the past couple of weeks. In this section, Jesus has been addressing the Jewish religious establishment, warning them not to assume they are special before God because of either their Abrahamic bloodlines or their strict adherence to the Mosaic law.

Two weeks ago, we heard about fieldworkers who came to work late in the day and ended up being paid the same as those who had worked since dawn. Matthew was focusing there on Jesus’ teaching that those who had been faithful to God since the beginning were to receive no preferential treatment over later converts.

Last week, we heard about Jesus telling the chief priests and elders that the tax collectors and prostitutes, in other words, notorious sinners, would get into the kingdom of heaven ahead of them. Again, no special favors for the apparently holy and righteous.

Today we hear about tenant farmers who disregard, mistreat and kill the agents who have come to collect the landowner’s legitimate property. Finally they even kill the landowner’s son. Jesus asks the chief priests and Pharisees what the landowner should do, and they reply, reasonably enough, that the wicked tenants should be punished and the land given to other tenants who will respect the owner/tenant contract.

Jesus then springs the trap, and tells the self-righteous “holy” people that the kingdom of heaven will be taken from them and given to those who will respect the God/human being covenant. In other words, the chief priests and Pharisees, the religious establishment, are themselves the wicked tenants.

These three parables are illustrations of Jesus warning against Pharisaical exceptionalism. Those who have been scrupulously righteous are to expect no special treatment from God, especially when they ignore God’s legitimate claims on their lives, and ignore and mistreat God’s messengers.

According to my commentaries, Matthew clearly interpreted these teachings to mean that Judaism had been superseded by Christianity. Please note that Matthew is not saying that Jews are now damned. Matthew’s community embraced Jews as well as Gentiles, and Matthew himself was probably a Jew. But with Jesus, Matthew shows, God inaugurates a new stage of

God's relationship with human beings, and those who insist on the old ways are going to be left behind, especially if, in their adherence to the old ways, they ignore what their relationship with God was supposed to be like from the very beginning.

My commentaries also point out that this passage, and others like it, has been cited in support of Anti-Semitism and persecution of Jews for centuries. This is a misread. All it does is substitute Christian exceptionalism for Jewish exceptionalism. That is to miss the point. Jesus is not just preaching against Jewish exceptionalism. He is preaching against religious exceptionalism of any kind: the idea that anybody, because of their birth or their righteousness, can assume God's favor over anyone else.

God's favor, God's love, God's grace, is God's to give. We don't and can't earn it. This is so hard for us human beings to accept! To complicate matters, there are plenty of Christians who present Christianity primarily as a moral system, ready to condemn and exclude the inferior. Christianity *is not* fundamentally a moral system. Christianity is, fundamentally, a radical self-giving to God, in recognition that everything we have is God's to begin with.

Please don't ignore the underlying principle of this parable of the wicked tenants. The land they occupy is their Lord's. The fruit they produce is, legitimately, the Lord's. Their assumption that they can do whatever they like with the land and the produce, and, parenthetically, the Lord's messengers, is a fatal miscalculation.

Here's what that means for us: it's all God's. Everything we have is God's. Whatever we hold back from God, our belongings, our hearts and thoughts, is held, to some extent, under a false assumption.

This is not to say God begrudges us God's riches. God is generous, with the intention that we be generous in turn. When we fall into the trap of assuming that what we have is ours to do whatever we like with, forgetting that it is all God's, we become ungenerous. It is when we find ourselves being ungenerous that we know we have fallen into this trap. We know we have fallen short of the radical self-giving that is true Christianity.

Believe me, we fall into this trap with regularity. It is a sign of God's generosity that we are continuously forgiven and blessed. We fall, God forgives and blesses. How hard it is to accept this! We want to make progress! We want to get past the need for forgiveness and blessing! Well, in the fullness of time, we will be. Either that or we will know we will fall and be forgiven forever and it won't matter to us because we will know it's all about God and not about us anyway.

Because, in the end, it's all God's.