

Kingdom Economics: Cultivating Ownership

A sermon preached by Emily Hull McGee on October 8, 2017
on Matthew 21:33-46 at First Baptist Church on Fifth, Winston-Salem, NC

Over the past five weeks, those of us who gather here on Wednesday nights have experienced a most meaningful study on the Enneagram with Dr. Chris Copeland from Wake Forest University School of Divinity. The Enneagram is a tool for personal growth that identifies “nine distinct and fundamentally different patterns of thinking, feeling, and acting.”¹ By knowing more about yourself, the theory goes, you are more self-aware, more conscious of your actions, and thus, more able to relate clearly and lovingly with your neighbors. You may have heard us talking about this in the halls! Are you a 9: the Mediator? Or a 4: the Romantic? Do you more identify with a 6: the Loyal Skeptic, or 8: the Protector? As we’ve begun to learn more about the Enneagram, our wise teacher Dr. Copeland is quick to remind us that the Enneagram goes beyond an identification of *behavior* into a deep exploration of *motivation*, not just *what* we do, but *why* we do it.

This key distinction was on display last week, as three of our own brave brothers who identify as 1s, or Perfectionists, agreed to answer a series of questions about what it feels like to be motivated by a deep desire to be right. “Sometimes I have to straighten pictures in other

¹ David Daniels and Virginia Price, *The Essential Enneagram*, p1.

people's houses if they're crooked," one said. "I worked too much today, because I couldn't stop until I found that \$47.39 when reconciling my company's bank accounts," exclaimed another. When pressed to name why these things are important, we heard real, honest feelings emerge: "There's really no critique you can give me that I haven't already thought of all the time — I'm constantly aware of what I've done wrong." Said another: "I critique you not because I'm trying to be a jerk, but because I care deeply about your integrity and things being done well." It seems that no matter who you are or how you act, motivation matters.

It's motivation we wonder about when having a conversation with a friend that feels a little off, or when something we love or rely on changes in a disruptive way. It's motivation we seek when we lose a job or a relationship, or when we feel afraid or lackluster about an upcoming event. And just this week, it's motivation that countless journalists and investigators are trying to assign in the wake of the senseless tragedy in Las Vegas.² From the minor challenges of everyday life to the major acts of calculated violence, we feel compelled to ask: what's our motivation?

The deep wisdom of the Enneagram says that it could be feeling fear or being stifled, needing to be successful or needing to be needed. In today's gospel reading, Jesus tells a story commonly called The Parable of the Wicked Tenants. I might call it The Parable of Skewed Motivation.

² One of many such articles about motive can be found here: <http://www.cnn.com/2017/10/07/us/las-vegas-shooting-motive/index.html>

There was a landowner who had a vineyard, Jesus said. He bought that land and prepared it for use — the fence, the wine press, and the watchtower equipped it for future cultivation. But for whatever reason (the motivation isn't clear!), that landowner didn't stay there. He didn't build a little cabin on the land to tend it for a hobby or even visit it on the weekends. Instead, he leased it to some tenants and left town.

Well, like any vineyard upon first planting, it would take about five years to go from seeds to harvest.³ So for five years, these tenants took care of the grapes. Five years of making sure the soil was just right, five years of fretting over the first frost, five years of watering around the clock in the scorching sun. And just as the literal fruits of their labor began to burst forth in green globes and thick and tangy purple bursts, some unknown people showed up — slaves of that absent owner who couldn't even bother to come himself! — and began demanding their boss's share of the harvest. Oh, the nerve! You can just hear the righteous indignation whirring in the minds of those tenants, furious over the gall of that owner, out of sight and long-forgotten. "Doesn't he know about the long days and the aching backs that are required for such a yield? Doesn't he realize what all we've done?," they fumed. Resentment gave way to rage, and those slaves were assaulted and killed. That anger only heightened when

³ Bernard Brandon Scott, *Hear Then the Parable*, p249.

another round of slaves showed up for the owner's share of the harvest, and again, resentment — rage — violence.

So when the owner's son showed up, you have to imagine that these tenants' minds were whirling. We'll show him! He thinks he's coming to get his share, but he's going to try and take what we've worked for! It should be ours, not his! He doesn't even own the land! We have far more of a right to the harvest than he does! And their minds start swirling... so what if ... what if he wasn't around anymore? Who would get it all: harvest, land, inheritance, power, control? Might we?

The downward spiral that started with greed and envy and entitlement ends, as it does, in anger and loss and violence. What's mine is mine, and don't you dare try and take it! Motivated by ownership, we do the same thing, don't we? It sounds a little something like this:

This is my time. It's precious and important and in short supply; don't you waste it or take advantage of it.

This is my home. I've finally gotten my piece of the American dream, and I waited a long time for this; don't you dare tax me out of it.

This is my job. I work hard at it, mind my bosses, use it to provide for my family, and frankly should be promoted; don't you take it or assume you know how to do it.

This is my money. I earn it - moment by moment - and deserve to keep it if I want. Heck, I should get a raise; don't you nickel and dime me for it.

This is my friend or my partner or my child. I put up with him all the time, I show up for her when she needs, I kept him in diapers all those years, I should be the favorite; don't you try and crowd me out, or take my role away!

This is my set of beliefs. They mean a lot to me, they matter, and clearly, they're right; don't you try and convince me otherwise.

My, how tightly we grip to what we have, thinking it's ours to hoard and protect and control rather than gift to be shared and used and and given back. How quickly we turn on those who we feel are encroaching on what we own, enslaved by the very things we use to divide us from others. How easily we tell ourselves that the end justifies the means. How smoothly we inflict competition and envy upon our relationships, stacking up the haves with the have nots. How blindly we look at the abundance around us and congratulate ourselves on what we've got, failing to see all the people and privilege and access and sheer luck that made the conditions such for us to enjoy it. How painlessly we become sharecroppers who lord over a kingdom that's not our own nor ours to own, going to all lengths to remove any threat that crosses the vineyard fence.

Richard Rohr says that "there are two ways of being a prophet. One is to tell the enslaved that they can be free. It is the difficult path of Moses. The second is to tell those who think they are free that they are in fact

enslaved. This is the even more difficult path of Jesus."⁴ Jesus is the one in whom Paul 'suffered the loss of all things, regarding them as rubbish in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him.'" Jesus is the one who reminds those Pharisees and religious leaders that the vineyard they think they own is actually the kingdom of God far greater than all they could ask or imagine. Jesus is the one foundation, the rejected stone that became the cornerstone of all time and space. Jesus is the one who gently pries our tight fists from the things we cling so closely, liberating us from our sin and ourselves so that we can be bound up tightly with the God upon whose vine we branches are able to bear good fruit.

So how, then, are we to live? What mindset are we to bring to the vineyards of our resources, our relationships, our very lives? What shifts can we make in our motivations so that we bear good fruit of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self control? How can we loosen that which we jealously guard and desire to selfishly own, so that we can cultivate shared oversight of no less than the kingdom of God?

It's a good thing that the one who oversees the land sent his son to remind us of a motivation higher and purer than we'll ever fully understand. No amount of human emotion or action — no fear, no imperfection, no restlessness, no need to succeed or need to be needed —

⁴ Richard Rohr, *From Wild Man to Wise Man: Reflections on Male Spirituality*, p41.

was too much to keep that landowner relentlessly returning in some form to the land he so loved and the people entrusted with its care. "The tenants killed the son too," says Barbara Brown Taylor, "but he would not stay dead and to this day he is still haunting the vineyard, remind us that we are God's guests — welcome on this earth and welcome to it so long as we remember whose it is and how it is to be used."⁵

"The harvest will come!," we are promised. The harvest will come. And *that* is the inheritance that's ours to claim, an inheritance you might even call *resurrection*. Amen!

⁵ Barbara Brown Taylor, *Gospel Medicine*, p100.