

“A Production Quota”

October 5, 2008 – Matthew 21:33-46

INTRO: The original audience for this parable is the group of religious leaders at the temple in Jerusalem—the chief priests and elders who questioned Jesus’ authority. Jesus tells this story which points out that his authority comes from God, and people have had a long history of not listening to God, as though God has little to do with our lives. Jesus uses a story about a landlord and tenants to make his point.

Some of us in this room are old enough to remember “I Love Lucy”, and those who’ve never heard of this TV show, might want to find some old re-runs to enjoy the quirky humor to be found there. One of my favorite episodes was the one where Lucy and her friend Ethel have gone to work in a candy factory. They are new employees with a no-nonsense kind of boss, who regularly shows up to see how they’re doing. As the candy is produced and moves along on a conveyor belt through the factory, Lucy and Ethel are supposed to wrap each piece of candy. At first, they get along pretty well, but as their boss sees their good work, she speeds up the conveyor belt. You can imagine the antics—because Lucy and Ethel know they have to produce, to keep this job. As the speed gets faster and faster, they do just about anything with those pieces of candy—they stuff them in their hats, eat them, stuff them where they can’t be seen—anything to get them off that conveyor belt. All because they are being judged by their production quota.

The quota today for the Brewers is to try to win three out of five. The pressure is on for them. And in many situations and businesses, people must produce results or they will be out of a job or a livelihood. It’s becoming ever more difficult to meet those quotas, at least partially because of the current economic situation in our country. Car dealers aren’t selling as many cars, realtors aren’t selling as many homes, factory orders for some products are on the decline, and condo developers may have set their goal for the number of units they can pre-sell, only to find they’ve not met that goal.

I have a friend who works for a pre-fab home building company. A few years ago, they could barely keep up with the orders, and he was having to work overtime. Now, he is lucky if he can work two or three days a week. We know what it’s like to not meet standards and goals.

Today’s story is about production standards--story about a vineyard and tenants. It is made clear that God expects us to produce results in our lives, not, I think because God is a mean boss, but because we are like tenants who live in the world God created. This isn’t a story about the economy and whether we are able to keep up with things, but it’s a story about whether we are productive people who have their heads on straight about God being the landlord, and we are the renters. It’s an important story, because too often we may act as if we own the place. We may want to make our own decisions, thinking of our own individual wants and needs. We may want things on our own terms, where we don’t have to follow someone else’s rules.

“Jesus pushes us to examine whether we really agree with the premise that all of the earth, all of life, all that we have belongs ultimately to God. The vineyard owner has set the tenants up with all they need to make a good life for themselves and to honor their agreement with him. But in return, they use what has been entrusted to them as if they are in charge and have ultimate say about the ordering of the world. This sounds remarkably like us!” (Mary Lou Redding)

This parable is a reminder that we’re accountable to God, who expects good things from us-to produce and bear good fruit. In this vineyard story, “a part of the contract was that the tenants would return to the owner, an agreed upon rent or the appropriate percentage of the produce from the owner’s property. When the owner sent representatives to collect what was due, the tenants sent them away empty-handed.” (David Kalas)

God has sent, and keeps sending messengers among us to change our production habits, but we haven’t easily accepted their message or their ground rules for our lives. We may quietly overlook what Jesus’ teachings really say. Or we may reject the message of the prophets of old as being outdated for us today, or selectively screen out contemporary voices who make us feel uncomfortable. But the end result is the same. Some of those voices we ignore, may include God’s message for us.

In the life of the church, one of the voices I often trust is Diana Butler Bass. She has recently said that all this discussion about money “may betray the fact that capitalism is really an alternative God.”

Those are not easy words to hear, but as we try to be more faithful people, I think we need to spend some time reflecting on what place money holds in our lives, and whether the greed of some has led us down some shaky paths.

Jim Wallis, the founder of Sojourners, proposes that this might be a time to determine whether: “We have been seduced into lifestyles beyond our means, and contrary to our religious traditions of simplicity and stewardship. We may have been living on far too much credit, rather than living within our limits. We may sometimes put economic values ahead of family values. We may have been taken in by the relentless assault of advertising and a culture of consumption. We may have been valuing our lives too much by the cultural values of worth, instead of by the values of the kingdom of God.”

If we are producing good fruit, consistent with the reign of God, the writer of Matthew would have understood that fruit to include: righteous living—a life lived in a right relationship to God; human caring; and courageous witnessing

As God’s faithful people, what do we say or do, when the world around us is getting more unstable? For one thing, I think we need to once again remind ourselves that we are the stewards of this amazing universe, which God has created. We didn’t create it. And if God is the source of all we are and all we have, then God is our God, not money. Towering skyscrapers may be signs that we have put our faith in the market, rather than in God. And whatever we do to adapt to, or to try and correct the current realities, I wonder if beyond thinking about what it might mean to us personally, we could think about what it might mean to God?

The image of the landlord and the vineyard isn’t just found in the Gospels, it would have been familiar to the ancient Israelite people. The prophet Isaiah recounts the story where the owner expected the vineyard to yield good grapes, but it yielded sour ones: “I am the LORD All-Powerful! Israel is the vineyard, and Judah is the garden I tended with care. I had hoped for honesty and for justice, but dishonesty and cries for mercy were all I found.”

I read over those words, and kept wondering about all the decisions we make as a country, whether they are decisions about the economy, or our relationship with other nations, or the war in Iraq, or the environment, whether we are really being accountable to God who expects us to produce justice, righteousness, human caring?

I looked around for a good-news story about investment and production this week, and I found it. It is the story of Clarke Street School. About 80 first and second graders in that school were told that a group of local philanthropists will pay for extra help for the children, both in and out of school, and will guarantee that the children will be able to pay for college, provided the kids and their families follow through and live up to expectations for them. (JSOnline)

Talk about a positive spin on production quotas—think about the lives of those children, who could be effected in incredible ways, because of the investment others are willing to make on their behalf.

Think about the investment God makes in each of us, and hopefully the return that we bring back to God. But, we need to always remember the source of those gifts—the initial investor is God, not us, and not Wall Street.

There’s an old Jewish story about the Rabbi and the soap maker. They went for a walk together. The soap maker asked, "What good is religion? Look at all the trouble and misery of the world after thousands of years of teaching about goodness and truth and peace--after all the prayers and sermons and teachings. If religion is so good for people, why should this be?" The Rabbi said nothing. They continued walking until he noticed a child playing in the gutter. Then the Rabbi said, "Look at that child. You say that soap makes people clean, but see the dirt on that youngster. Of what good is soap? With all the soap in the world, the child is still filthy. I wonder how effective soap is, after all!"

The soap maker protested. "But, Rabbi, soap cannot do any good unless it is used!" “Exactly,” replied the Rabbi. “So it is with religion.”

The guidance of God in our lives, can’t do us any good, until we are willing to listen to God’s leading, so that our lives are informed in ways that help us live and produce up to our best potential as God’s faithful people. Let us pay attention to the owner of the vineyard who entrusts us with so much.

--Sue Burwell