

## Sermon for Sunday, October 8, 20223

We don't want to hear what we don't want to hear. Whether it's one's doctor saying that we need to lose a few (or more than a few) pounds, or whether it's a neighbor saying that your lawn doesn't look pretty enough and those trees need pruning, we all have moments when we want to ignore something that someone says to us.

It is a universal truth that there are things we don't want to hear. And yet, if we don't listen, we may miss an opportunity to be closer to Christ, the great teacher.

That is surely the point that Jesus is making in this painful parable about people who don't want to give to their landlord his due, and in order to avoid meeting the requirements of the landlord, they actually kill his agents and his son.

They don't want to hear that they have an obligation that they agreed to meet. Interestingly, they have no argument that what the landlord requires is fair. They have no argument that they actually owe a portion of their crops. They simply don't want to. They refuse to pay attention, because it doesn't suit them.

Imagine, if you will, a person who works in a business. There is a job description that lists the expectations that the employer expects the employee to do. The person decides that although he will fulfill the first four things on the list, they don't particularly like doing the other four things, so they simply will not do them. Even though the job description says all eight things are part of the job.

And then comes the day for the employee's annual review. The employer says, "You did a great job on items one through four, but you seem to never do items five through eight. Even though I remind you that you have to take care of those last four items, you never appear to do them. I'm giving you a warning that you must do all the tasks, or else you will be fired."

Straightforward enough, right?

And time passes, and the employee is still not doing the last four things, and the employer fires the employee. Seems fair. And also incredibly foolish of the employee, because there were so many options.

Let's say the reason the employee doesn't do those things is because it takes so long to do the first four, there just isn't any time. Wouldn't it make more sense to go to the boss and say "Listen, I know you want me to do all eight things, but there is too much work, and it seems like the first four things are the most

important. Can we modify the job description to more accurately reflect a reasonable workload for me?”

Or let’s say the reason the employee doesn’t do those things is that he doesn’t understand precisely what the boss expects for those last four things. Why wouldn’t he go to the boss and say “I don’t want to make a mistake and I’m not sure what your expectations are for these things. Tell me what you want.”

Or let’s say the last four things are tasks that are as unpleasant as anything you can imagine. I’ve got a friend who runs a waste treatment plant and he is very detailed and clear about what he expects from his employees because, frankly, many of those jobs do involve dealing with unpleasant stuff. He doesn’t want to bring someone on board who isn’t willing to do those tasks, because it’s a waste of time and money to hire someone who is unwilling to do the work required.

But let’s just say that the reason this employee doesn’t do the work required is because he didn’t pay attention when the job description was given to him, and now that he knows that, he’s trying to still get paid for doing less than he agreed to. Maybe a little sneaky. Maybe a little manipulative. Maybe a little lazy. Doing as little as he think he can get away with, until he gets caught.

One hopes that this imaginary employee isn’t like the workers in this parable, who actually kill those who come to get what the landlord requires, thinking (rather strangely) that if the boss’s son is dead, they get to inherit the property. Even in the ancient world, that strategy didn’t work.

And when Jesus asks his listeners what the landlord should do to the murderous tenants, they say “put them to death and bring on board other tenant workers.”

Jesus frames it a little differently, though: he says if workers are not fruitful, if they don’t pay attention to what the requirements are, they will be replaced by those who can do the work. Not surprisingly, the Pharisees and scribes hear that, and they correctly deduce that Jesus is talking about them. They are the ones who are not fruitful. They are the ones who are not paying attention to Jesus’ words. They may describe him as a rejected stone, and they don’t need to pay attention to him. They don’t need to modify their behavior, they think, and so his words – words that are such a balm to so many – are an indictment that angers them. And they want to take revenge, as the tenant workers killed the landlord’s son.

There’s only one problem. The people who are not the religious leaders, who are not the secular governmental leaders, those average working people and hurting people, they hear Jesus and they say, “yes, yes. This is how things should

be.” And the high and mighty who want Jesus to just be quiet, or they will shut him up, fear that they are outnumbered. That fear will not stop them forever – we’re only a few chapters away from Jesus’ arrest, torture and death, after all. But for now, they grumble among themselves, and plot.

Wouldn’t it have been better to say “this fellow is interesting, and he makes some good points?”

Wouldn’t it have been better to say “Jesus, what you’re saying is hard for us to accept, but we want to hear more.”

But they didn’t. They did something that was a horror and a tragedy, and then Jesus was resurrected, so all their plotting did not make the power of Jesus go away, it actually amplified it.

Had they listened, it might have been different. Had they lived into the responsibilities of their position, instead of simply reveling in the authority and power it brought, it might have been different. But they did not.

We, on the other hand, have the gift of Jesus’ words and guidance. If we listen and truly hear what he is saying, we will be rewarded by a closer relationship with God and a world that is much better than the one we inhabit now.

What fruits are we called to bear? How can we be even more fruitful than we already are? How can we sweep away fear and desire for power and distrust and simply follow the one who gave all for us?

And so we pray:

Dear Jesus, we are your children, and like children, we sometimes get distracted from the holy way by the idols of money, power, winning, preening. Keep speaking to us, so that we can reset our feet to follow your path, that path of love. Let us realize what is truly valuable, what is truly called for, and act accordingly. Bless us and bless those with whom we interact, so that we all can follow that path together.

Amen.