**October 5, 2014 – 17th Sunday after Pentecost**

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As some of you know, I have been a little distracted this week by what seems to be the complete implosion of my beloved General seminary, or, as Michael and I like to put it, THE General Theological Seminary of the Episcopal Church.

General Seminary has the distinction of being the oldest Episcopal seminary in the United States. It was founded in 1817 by an act of General Convention and is the only seminary that’s not owned by a diocese. Building started in 1820 on land donated by Clement Clarke Moore, the guy who wrote *A Visit from St. Nicholas*, and there it has been, in the Manhattan neighborhood known as Chelsea, ever since.

Over the nearly two hundred years of its existence, General has known its fair share of controversy and challenges. Almost right out of the gate, it became a proponent of the radical “new” Oxford movement, which is responsible for, among other things, the way I’m dressed and the fact that there are candles on the altar. Before that, all clergy dressed all the time in what’s called choir dress, which is what our readers wear now – cassock and surplice. And flowers and candles were forbidden in the sanctuary and even illegal in England. Everything was plain, plain, plain, or else it was considered too popish or romish – or in other words, Roman Catholic.

So that was the start, at General. More recently, in the 80s, the seminary was in the middle of a very, very nasty neighborhood, to the point that there was concertina wire on the fence surrounding the grounds and people were regularly mugged just outside. Then, in 2001, General was at the center of relief efforts after 9/11, with most classes being suspended for that first semester after it happened and almost all of the students and faculty performing some kind of chaplain service at Ground Zero for months. This was far from a controversy, but it certainly was a challenge.

Then, during Michael’s and my time there, years of deferred maintenance and bad spending choices pushed General to the brink of financial ruin, only to be saved by a very savvy President, some draconian property sales, and a lot of prayer and determination on the part of the faculty and students. This was both controversial because of the property sales and challenging because of the insecurity and not knowing if we’d even have a seminary to go to the next year.

And then there’s this most recent unpleasantness, as people used to call the Civil War. I won’t bore you with the reams of information that we’ve been poring through over this past week, but it started with some pretty bad accusations of racism, homophobia, sexism, unprofessional behavior, and bullying on the part of the current Dean and President, most, if not all, of which seem to have been witnessed and substantiated.

Eight of the ten full time faculty members, after many attempts to speak to the Dean about his behavior, and many attempts to meet with the Board of Trustees about the hostile work environment, took the drastic measure of walking out on strike. The Board responded by firing them, or more accurately, “accepting their resignations,” which had never actually been given. More letters, accusations, allegations, and general nastiness followed, and that seems to be where we are right now.

So, keep that story in the back of your mind while we turn to today’s Gospel reading, the Parable of the Wicked Tenants. This parable is the second of three that are directed pretty pointedly at the Pharisees and Scribes in the Temple. They all talk in some way about the how some people have rejected God’s prophets and Jesus, the Messiah, and the bad end to which they’ll come as a result.

And so we could leave it there, in the distant past of Jewish history, which I think a lot of people would like to do. Because we’re Christians, right? We’re the good tenants to whom the landowner entrusts his vineyard after the former tenants are all nastily killed for their crimes.

Unfortunately, history has proved that looking at this parable in terms of a fight between all Jews and Christians, with the Jews being the bad tenants and the Christians being their good replacements, has caused a lot of anti-Semitism and violence over the past two thousand years. And it isn’t an accurate way of reading it in the first place since the text of all three versions of this parable make it clear that Jesus is specifically talking about the Jewish leadership of his time – the Sanhedrin – and not all Jews in general.

But even realizing that fact, while important, still doesn’t quite get at how this parable is speaking to us, today. To help us out, let’s scoot forward about fifteen hundred years, where I found an unlikely source to quote in an Episcopal sermon – the Reformed theologian, John Calvin. In his commentary on this exact parable, Calvin said that (1) we should expect people, and especially religious leaders, to try to get in the way of the reign of Christ, and (2) no matter what machinations are brought against the church, God will be ultimately be victorious.

Now we’re talking. This has direct relevance on the Church today – on the rise and fall of megachurches, on inter- and intra-denomination fighting, on the situation at my seminary, on our own little corner of the Church here in Huron, and even, dare I say it, on stewardship.

It’s because we’re all human, and humans fear change. Fear it, hate it, resist it, run from it, you name it.

I’ll leave megachurches and denominational squabbling for another day and start with General Seminary. Beginning with the financial troubles that surfaced with a vengeance in 2010, major changes were forced on the seminary. It was either make changes or close, and closing, it was decided, would have been worse. So the seminary acquiesced to these changes with varying amounts of grace and acceptance. Then things were left to simmer while the Board searched for a new Dean and President.

With so much change to deal with, and much of it forced down the Board’s throat, they apparently decided to take a time machine back to the fifties to look for their new Dean. And they seemed to have found the perfect guy, although he wasn’t actually born until 1961 and has only been a priest for ten years. As a former lawyer, their choice was an authority figure, smart, and confident. Maybe even a visionary. But like many clergy were in the earlier days of the church, he seems to be focused on his own personal power and influence, rather than the more collaborative model of the modern Church. He is definitely from the “Father Knows Best” school of leadership.

Needless to say, the reign of Christ is taking a beating on this one. Some of it is involuntary and some of it is on purpose, but who’s to say which is which? Into this poor, beleaguered, post-traumatic-stressed-out seminary, this guy was dropped, and the results haven’t been pretty. But, really, wasn’t he just doing what the Board wanted him to? Who’s really at fault here?

Hint – either no one or everyone. Because, as Jesus points out and Calvin reiterates, people WILL stand in the way of the reign of Christ. The Gospel and John Calvin imply that this hindrance is malicious, but I think at least as often it’s because we’re all human and as I said, we all fear change.

Let’s move on to our own little corner of God’s Kingdom – Grace Church. I think I can say without fear of contradiction that we are one of the most progressive churches in Huron. I mean that collectively, not necessarily individually, so if you’re conservative I don’t mean to insult you. But our Episcopal doctrine is one of openness and acceptance, and we try to live out our faith in that same open and accepting way.

But things move slowly in our little corner of paradise. “The Way It’s Always Been Done” is alive and well among us. And before you call up the Bishop to complain, about me badmouthing Grace, this isn’t always a bad thing. Sometimes it’s not a good idea to jump on each new fad in the Church. Sometimes it’s better to take our time and consider all angles before making a move. But that caution can also result in analysis paralysis and end up with nothing being done.

Grace has been through a lot of changes in the past twenty or so years – some good and some bad. You’re tired. And I say “you” because I haven’t been through those changes with you. As a matter of fact, I WAS one of those changes that you took a big chance on. And after a huge change like new leadership, it’s only natural that we would want to sit back and take a little rest.

This is not active obstruction or malicious action. It’s merely human behavior. But it can get in the way of God’s work nevertheless.

And then finally, there’s stewardship. This is such a complex issue that I couldn’t possibly cram it all into the end of one sermon, but I’ll give it a try. First of all, let’s stop calling it stewardship. Stewardship is a stained-glass word that has all but lost its meaning through overuse. And let’s not call it Time, Talent, and Treasure, either. That’s another stained-glass and virtually meaningless phrase, but also it can be a major cop out.

Instead, let’s call it Giving. Or Pledging. Or maybe even Tithing. Because no matter how important time and talent are, and they are absolutely VITAL, really what we’re talking about here is Money. Plain and simple. Giving money to the mission of the Church. Giving the money that you have temporary custody of back to the One who gives us everything.

Money is inherently change. It is your efforts chanted briefly into a mutually recognized symbol, and then it’s either changed back into objects that in turn fuel your efforts in some way, or it goes to pay for someone else’s efforts on your behalf. It’s a construct whose meaning we have all agreed upon, but without that agreement it’s worthless.

But we have turned it into an idol and one that’s far removed from the source. Because the source of everything is God and everything, even our money and all that it represents, comes from God.

The concept of the tithe is found throughout the Bible – in both the Old and New Testaments. It involves taking a tenth of everything you earn or grow right off of the top and returning it back to God. Not a tenth of your profits or a tenth of what you can spare after expenses, but a tenth off the top. The idea isn’t that God needs the money, obviously, but rather this is a way to show our gratitude to the ultimate Giver of all things for every blessing he gives us. It’s part of our covenantal relationship with God – our responsibility.

But we’re only human. We fear giving up that much of our income because we can’t predict when we might need it. Believe me, I know what this kind of fear feels like, but also to face that fear and move through it, and I certainly wouldn’t ask anyone to do anything I wasn’t doing myself. Or we tell ourselves that we’re just being prudent with our money, which takes God out of the equation altogether. Or, and I have to say I don’t think this applies to any of us, some people might resent being made to share their stuff with God, because it’s THEIR stuff, which is just immature and selfish.

But if money is change, just think of the positive changes we could make if each and every one of us tithed, or came close to it. I believe we would have a balanced budget without having to tap into the endowment. I believe we could expand our outreach to the point where people across the street and across the state would be talking about it and wondering just what’s in the water over there at Grace Church, Huron. I believe we could relax about the future, knowing that our relationship with the great Giver of Life is in balance.

These would all be pretty big changes, but they would be exciting ones, not ones to fear and avoid. Far from standing in the way of the Reign of Christ, we would be helping it to come about all the sooner.

Because it IS coming. We don’t know when or how, but Jesus WILL return. Because, as Calvin said, no matter what we do to stop it or get in the way, God WILL be victorious.

Jesus said, quoting Psalm 118, “The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord's doing, and it is amazing in our eyes?”

Jesus IS that cornerstone – the keystone of the Church and the foundation of our lives. And he IS amazing. Let’s not reject him in our fear and brokenness, but embrace him in gratitude and in giving all that we have and all that we are to his glory!

Amen.