

Mat 21:33-46

Expect Rejection...But not just of the gospel, as a system of ideas or nice concepts. This is personal...this is a rejection of Jesus as a person!

Great quote I just read the other day... Christianity would be nice in the world...but we really haven't tried it yet...at least not the way Jesus taught it.

Embedded within this parable is rejection and violence against the landowner's son...and a reminder that the heart of our faith is about "relationship"...with God and with one another.

The tenants did not seize and kill an idea, a system, or a doctrine. They seized and killed another human being...and in this gospel that human being is Jesus! A person's life is more valued than any idea... but we usually tend to look at things in the exact opposite way! Giving up your life for a cause rather than for another human being!

And God's relationship with us gets personal through the person of Jesus.

All throughout history we can see that the truth might be hidden or obfuscated by religion, an organization or government to sustain their own beliefs...right or wrong.

For many years the Church sought to suppress and kill ideas, heresies, and humans along with it, such as that the earth was not at the center of the universe...or that it was not flat...but just because a group of people in power believe in something... doesn't ever, ever make it true!

The crime here is in the violence against the messenger. The one who reveals God's greater truth to us. A person is killed...it's the relationship that always matters!

And God becomes man...making God-self vulnerable...Why?

Do you ever wonder just why God wastes any time or attention with us at all?!

The secret, God's MO, is in that little book we call the Bible...but taken as a whole...not just the parts that support your particular points of view.

Sometimes when we slice and dice up the Bible we can easily lose the plot and main themes running throughout it. I'd like to take today to talk about one of those major themes...Simply Put - God WITH US!

This story begins with God's creation of the world and ends with God's judgment and re-creation of it. As we wait for the coming of the Lord...as we prepare...we may easily forget that God is ALREADY here WITH us!

I wish to offer you a perspective that I first heard in a sermon from the Reverend Skye Jethani: I want us to zoom out and look at the bigger picture...The whole story...

The Bible at its heart is a love story between God and God's creation...That's God's story!

In the beginning was the word, and the word was WITH God, and the word was God... He was in the beginning WITH God! That is how John begins his Gospel... reminding us that before there was anything... there was God...and that God existed in community...in relationship WITH God's self...

In Genesis God speaks the world into existence: he creates a man and a woman and a garden, and there he walks *with* them in creation. Then God befriends a man named Abraham and he promises him that he would be *with* him, he then creates a nation of people that would be his very own.

Then God talks to Moses and sends him to free his people in bondage, and Moses says who am I Lord that I should do this and God replies you will go because I will be *with* you. Then Joshua, and David... Then we see God through the prophets as they deliver God's message to his people who have strayed...seems we are still straying.

God reassures all those... in relationship **with** God... throughout the entirety of the Bible... to not be afraid because **I am with you**. You see this over and over and over again! God seeks evermore to get closer to creation and to us.

Then we come to the birth of Christ (the new old testament), Emmanuel literally means God With us! And once again God comes to be with us! He ate with us, he wept with us, and he suffered with us. As Jesus is hanging upon a cross he assures the penitent thief that today he would be *with* him in paradise.

And at the end of Matthew's Gospel the one we are reading right now...Jesus upon being lifted up to heaven assures his frightened apostles that he will be *with* them even to the end of the age...you sensing a theme here!?

WITH...a simple preposition; but that one word occurs over **6,000 times** throughout the Bible, capturing the essence of our Christian story. It captures the center of our faith...a relationship with a living God...and that from the beginning of time... God has always sought to be **with** us.

Yet even in the Church, and here in the vineyard (code for God's creation), we sometimes ignore this simple but powerful notion. Instead of focusing on a life **WITH** God we exchange that word with some other preposition...

Many especially seek to get others to live **UNDER** God, under His authority and rules. And we see the friction and harm this causes other human beings and the vineyard. And many of us here think our primary posture should be living our life **FOR** God. To do things for him and to carry out his mission here on earth...as if God needs us to do something for God...to earn God's favor...

In some circles its life **FROM** God. And in some cases, it's even life **WITHOUT** God. In all of this we forget that the calling of all our lives from the beginning to the end and all of it in between is to live life **WITH** God...in communion **with** God and **with** each other in creation!

This simple shift in perspective profoundly changes how we come to see and relate to God and one another!

It especially changes the way we see our own circumstances. That our situations and circumstances then cease to define who we are! Whether we're in a prison, stuck in our homes, or in a place of suffering, or brokenness...the important thing is that wherever, or however we are... God is always right there **with** us.

It doesn't mean we can't try and change our circumstances, but don't fall into the trap... that in order to live our lives more fully, that we must somehow change our situation to do so.

Many of us here in our churches come to believe that the purpose of our lives is valued by what we do **FOR** God. And sometimes this leads us to elder brother syndrome, taken from Luke's parable of the prodigal son... where we have to earn

heaven through our good deeds, but then why would you need Jesus at all. Just save yourself...And in that parable, we see that the Father just really wants to be **with** BOTH of his sons.

You see, what's most important to God is not what you do FOR God but rather that you live your life in relationship WITH God.

God's desire (levav) the Hebrew word we translate as heart in the Bible...God's heart is to be **with** us. Think about it, when you love someone deeply and completely, more than anything else, what's your greatest desire...simply...just to be **with** them! And that's what we are here to do...remind one another.

And along with how we see our circumstances, and equally as important, is that we bear witness to this fact... to remind ourselves... and others... that God is indeed here and now **with** us all!

As we live out our lives we strive throughout our whole lifetime to be with others in order to validate who we are...that's very human (Psych 101). We seem to desperately need a witness to our lives. We need to feel like our life matters and has meaning and purpose.

And our culture has taken this to extremes, we put everything out there, look at Instagram, Facebook and Twitter. We just want someone to notice us... to give our lives value and validation.

Little tidbit... no one really cares what you ate for lunch the other day or that you got a new haircut...but maybe, just maybe, someone will give us a thumbs up...maybe someone will notice me.

It's a celebrity, reality show, mindset...we all want a witness to our lives. And we all worry about how other's see us. And yet the most important thing about our lives as Christians is something that no one can see...our hidden relationship...our witness WITH our Creator!

This exhibitionist culture shows why so many Christians don't value or even practice prayer. Because others can't see it!

However, it's really about being in relationship **with** God. The most meaningful prayer is invisible. To pray regardless of your circumstances, in order to

experience the presence of God wherever you are. That's what matters most, not the outcomes... but God **with** you... in relationship.... right there in the midst of your life...regardless of your circumstances.

And what's prayer...just talking... communicating...it's never about achieving something... it's about talking to and being heard by God...**it's about being in a relationship with God!** Where Spirit connects! Going through our day to day at a much deeper level... being aware that God is right there in relationship **with** us...and relationship and communication always go hand and hand! Good Communication always equals good Relationships.

You see your life will never ever go unnoticed because God is always your witness...God values you! If nothing changed in your life (your career, your marital status, your finances, COVID). Do you believe you could still experience the fullness of God?

It's challenging for us to believe sometimes because we live in a time and a culture that seeks to define people by their circumstances. But when you see your life as being connected with God... then all of your life becomes holy. Qadosh=Set Apart

You become defined by the bigger fact that you are a child of God... and hearing that still small voice that whispers to each and everyday that you are my beloved son, you are my beloved daughter.

That is the root and center of our lives. Don't ever exchange that for anything less, even something as glorious as ministry FOR God. Living our lives **with** God means that we SEE life differently, not as something to escape...not as something to change! But we come to see our life in relation to God and whether our circumstances be good or bad ceases then to be at the center of our lives!

Living in this mindset, we come to look at ourselves in a new way, we don't have to judge our lives by what we have yet to accomplish... and we certainly don't come to judge and view others that way either...

Instead we find our meaning...our purpose...our identity, in the fact that God is our witness... ever **with** us... And that we are God's children in relationship.

Throughout the Bible you can clearly see God's desire to be with us. And here we are all welcomed physically into that communion right at this table each week...

...so many people today are caught up in fear... FEAR...leading to violence against one another... so many leaders right now... those tenants of the vineyard... act like they are it's owners...

Last I looked, there were no boundary marked upon the earth...and just because we draw lines on a map or build towers and fences doesn't make the vineyard ours...this is why nationalism can be so very dangerous.

We have always been the vineyard's tenants...never it's owners...Native American's have always viewed the sacredness of the world this way...and yet we westerners have abused the vineyards for our own ends at the expense of so many and so much on this planet.

Acting in this manner perpetuates all manners of hurt and evil in the world...especially against those who don't agree with us... is this how the master wants their creation tended...in fear and hatred and violence!

Well let me tell you how it all ends... this is how the Bible ends, the final revelation of John: a new heaven and a new earth... and he heard a loud voice from the throne saying behold, the dwelling place of God is *with* man, he will dwell *with* them and they will be his people and God himself will be *with* them as their God.

So you see from the beginning of the story to its end... and everywhere in between... the central calling of our lives is to live a life in relationship **with** God. And we don't have to wait for a new heaven and a new earth to experience that reality right now today.

Imagine how you would live your life today if you knew deep inside you that God was right there with you as part of your story! And by the way that's how the Saints and mystics throughout all of history have lived...and that's how we... those of us who would follow Jesus, should strive to live our lives as well.

So may we all come to know, deep in our hearts, that as we live and move and have our being...in all of life's circumstances... and in all the stories of our lives, that God is right there... right in the midst of it all. In the beginning... in the end... and everywhere in between... for God truly is WITH us... ALWAYS!

Your faithful servant, carmen