

Explore the Bible: Cornerstone

March 29, 2021

- *The Explore the Bible lesson for April 18 focuses on Luke 20:9-19.*

The late Fred Craddock was an extremely well-known Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) preacher. He was not a man of profound physical stature. Being a native of rural East Tennessee, he carried the distinct accent of those roots until he died in 2015. He had a rather high-pitched voice. I once heard him say his voice sounded like wind blowing through a crack on a fence post.

No one ever shaped this preacher's way of thinking about how to preach (or write) more than did Fred Craddock. His greatest gift was his ability to take the simplest things in life, especially in nature, and use them to illustrate divine truths too deep to grasp. He preached in such a way that you'd find yourself in the stories you thought applied to someone else.

Sounds like someone else we know, doesn't it? Jesus was that kind of preacher. He could take a bird or a fish, a body of water or the endless sky and draw word pictures with them. It's that kind of preaching/teaching he was doing in the text for today.

Some in the crowd, the political and religious leaders in particular, saw what Jesus was attempting to say and openly acknowledged it. They didn't like what they saw in the picture of themselves Jesus drew.

When they recognized themselves in the spiritual mirror Jesus held up for them, they resented it, because his words were a threat to their power and authority. It was an authority that only thinly veiled the spiritual vacuum in their souls.

How is power exercised?

It was so offensive, in fact, that Luke reports that those folks began looking for “a way to arrest (Jesus) immediately.” That’s always the ultimate test of another’s authority—how they use it.

We all have some kind of power, be it financial, sexual, relational social or whatever. There is no greater test of our true character than how we use our power.

The “teachers of the law and the chief priests” used their power to control others even to the extent of trying to control their most sacred thoughts. They used their power to manipulate others, not serve them.

My wife and I were volunteering to help with our church supper one Wednesday evening. The layperson in charge asked me to staff the payment table, receiving the money people paid for their food.

I’d only been sitting in the chair a few minutes when an elderly woman came up to the desk and with no little authority in her voice said: “That’s my job! I’ve been doing that for years!”

Trust me, I do understand how, as we grow older, routine and familiarity become more and more important. Not to mention that, if we have served in church all of our lives, we resent anyone who presumes to take our position away from us, even if that position is a seat in the church we believe is reserved solely for us.

At the same time, nothing is more important, especially as we grow older, than a good and healthy assessment of what we do and whether it’s time to let someone else coming along behind have their turn “at the wheel.” It’s equally important that we come clean with ourselves about why we do what we do for God.

Is what we do genuinely about serving others or is it about us taking care of ourselves and our position? It can be a painful self-examination.

Stewards and servants, not owners

We should be very cautious not to assign literal meaning to the details of a parable. Jesus' parable about the vineyard workers, especially the one the vineyard tenants killed, was meant to expose the character of those in religious leadership. One thing about this parable is the way in which it attempts to remind everyone, including us, is that they (we) don't own the authority God has given us. We are only stewards of it for a time.

Many Baptist churches once practiced "closed communion." It was "closed" in the sense that one had to be a member of that church in order to take the Lord's Supper in that church. Thankfully, it appears to be a dying custom.

It always is important to remember no one church or person owns it. It's the Lord's Supper. We are only privileged to be stewards of it.

It is in that light that Jesus reinforces his place in the kingdom of God. In coming to save us, Jesus accomplished doing so by serving, not controlling. His service was and is his self-sacrifice on the cross.

The leaders of the day thought Jesus was threatening their power. They were missing the point. Whether we stand or fall depends on whether or not we rest on the "solid rock," the very cornerstone of our salvation.

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