

Sermon Note: Refusing the Host

Fifth Sunday in Lent

Introduction

As we continue our Lenten series *The Last Supper: Conversations That Led to the Cross*, the stories have been building. A reckless sower scattered seed everywhere. A host kept sending his servant back into the streets. A father threw a party before his son could finish apologizing. A rich man feasted while a poor man sat outside his gate. Each week, Bishop Will Willimon's question has been: *Who is God, and what is God up to?*

As the days get closer to Holy Week, the tone of Jesus' parables shifts. In Luke 20, Jesus tells the parable of the tenant farmers (sometimes called the "wicked" tenants). The parable is about what happens when the people entrusted with a generous gift start to believe it belongs to them, and what it looks like when they reject the owner's authority over what was always his. Bishop Willimon puts it plainly: the owner's response to this long history of rejection is to send the beloved son. That tells us a great deal about who God is! The tenants' response tells us something about who we can become if we don't pay attention.

Illustration Video

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jqLn9NnvSJM>

In this clip from *October Sky* (1999), Homer Hickam returns to Coalwood after winning the national science fair. He visits his ailing teacher, thanks his father at the mine entrance, and invites him to one last rocket launch — where he hands his father the button.

Why This Video?

From the moment Homer Hickam felt inspired to build rockets, he was asking his father to support him. In any way at all. John Hickam managed the Coalwood coal mine and had a clear plan for his son: work in the mines, build strength, maybe land a football scholarship. Rockets weren't part of it. And so, John never came to a single launch. He warned Homer off company property. When a coworker from the machine shop helped the boys, John punished him by reassigning him to dangerous work underground. Homer kept asking, and John kept saying no. Or saying nothing at all.

After winning the national science fair for his rocket work, Homer comes home and goes to see his father. He tells him that scientist Wernher von Braun isn't his hero, and the silent implication is that, in fact, his father is his hero. He invites him to the final launch and leaves without waiting for an answer. For the first time, John shows up to a launch. Homer hands him the launch button, and John finally sees the brilliance of his son.

Video Discussion Questions

1. Miss Riley tells Homer she's going to brag about him and the Rocket Boys to every future class she teaches. What does it mean to someone to hear that their story will be used to inspire others?

2. Homer tells his father they're more alike than different. His father doesn't respond. What do you think that moment is like for Homer? What do you think it's like for his father?
3. Homer says Wernher von Braun isn't his hero. The implication seems clear. What do you think it means for Homer to say this to his father? What do you think it means for his father?
4. Homer invites his father to the launch and then walks away without waiting for an answer. What does this invitation mean to Homer? What does it mean to John?
5. John Hickam shows up, even to the surprise of Homer's mother. What do you think it means for him to show up after staying away for so long?
6. Homer says, "It won't fly unless somebody pushes the button," and hands the launch control to his father: "It's yours if you want it." He could have pushed the button himself. Why offer it to his father?
7. After John presses the button and the rocket climbs, he puts his hand on Homer's shoulder and smiles without saying a word. What do you think that gesture means?

Luke 20:9-19 (CEB)

⁹Jesus told the people this parable: "A certain man planted a vineyard, rented it to tenant farmers, and went on a trip for a long time. ¹⁰When it was time, he sent a servant to collect from the tenants his share of the fruit of the vineyard. But the tenants sent him away, beaten and empty-handed. ¹¹The man sent another servant. But they beat him, treated him disgracefully, and sent him away empty-handed as well. ¹²He sent a third servant. They wounded this servant and threw him out. ¹³The owner of the vineyard said, 'What should I do? I'll send my son, whom I love dearly. Perhaps they will respect him.' ¹⁴But when they saw him, they said to each other, 'This is the heir. Let's kill him so the inheritance will be ours.' ¹⁵They threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. What will the owner of the vineyard do to them? ¹⁶He will come and destroy those tenants and give the vineyard to others."

When the people heard this, they said, "May this never happen!"

¹⁷Staring at them, Jesus said, "Then what is the meaning of this text of scripture: *The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone?* ¹⁸Everyone who falls on that stone will be crushed. And the stone will crush the person it falls on." ¹⁹The legal experts and chief priests wanted to arrest him right then because they knew he had told this parable against them. But they feared the people.

Scripture Study Questions

1. The owner plants a vineyard, rents it to tenants, and leaves for a long time. When he sends servants to collect his share, the tenants beat them and send them away empty-handed. What does the owner's repeated sending of servants tell you about his character?
2. After three servants are rejected, the owner says, "I'll send my son, whom I love dearly. Perhaps they will respect him." Do you think this is important to the story? Why or why not?
3. The tenants see the son and say, "This is the heir. Let's kill him so the inheritance will be ours." What has happened to the tenants' understanding of whose vineyard this is?

4. Jesus tells this parable in the temple. Luke tells us the legal experts and chief priests knew he had told it against them, and they wanted to arrest him right then. What does it tell you about the parable's power that their first response is to silence the one telling it?
5. Jesus quotes Psalm 118: "The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone." The builders are the ones whose job it is to know which stones belong. How did the people who should have recognized this stone end up rejecting it?
6. Bishop Willimon observes that the owner's response to this long history of rejection is not to abandon the vineyard but to send the beloved son. What does this persistence reveal about who God is and what God is up to?
7. The tenants act as if the vineyard belongs to them. Where do you see that same assumption at work in the world today? Where do you see it in your own life?

Weekly Action

The tenants in this parable forgot whose vineyard they were working in. Over time, what had been entrusted to them started to feel like it belonged to them, and when the owner sent someone to collect what was his, they refused him.

This week, pick one area of your life where you hold responsibility: a role at work, a position at church, a family dynamic, a friendship, a project you lead. On a piece of paper or in a note on your phone, write down honest answers to these questions: *When did I start treating this as mine? What am I protecting about it? When someone challenges how I handle it, what is my first reaction?*

Then pay attention during the week. Notice the moments when you feel defensive, like when a suggestion feels like an intrusion, or when someone else's input feels unwelcome. You don't have to do anything. Just notice it, write it down, and take it to God in prayer. Ask God to show you the difference between faithfully tending what you've been given and holding on to what was never yours.

Prayer

Almighty God, the author and perfecter of our faith, give us the grace and wisdom to follow your commandments and make Jesus the cornerstone of our faith. May we receive Jesus and those who serve you in your vineyard. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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