

“WHAT IS IN IT FOR GOD?”

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As a pastor, people expect from me things they don't hear from others. They expect things like blessing, such as the lady who'd never been here before bringing her box turtle to the Blessing of the Animals. People also expect different questions, such as instead of “how have you been?” or “how is everything?” I sometimes ask, “so how's your *soul* these days?” I always get a double-take on that one. “Hmm. I'll have to get back to you on that, pastor.” But I like to drop it for the game-changing self-awareness it brings.

Another question I sometimes let fly—usually in working groups--as I sense us getting too caught up in ourselves and too oblivious to God's purpose is, “What is in it for God?”

Author Norman Mailer describes a middle-aged actress in one of his novels. She dabbles in Hollywood philosophy, specializing in the human condition and character analysis on the side. She has her categories,” the author explains. “There were good guys, low-lives, and phonies, and the worst was a phony. A good-guy, I learned by example, was a guy who made no excuses for looking out for himself. A low-life was a man who had the same philosophy but took extra pleasure in hurting other people. A phony was someone who claimed to be concerned with anything but himself.” Pretty jaded, isn't it?

But our faith actually affirms a core truth in there. Martin Luther, the church's great Reformer who lived in the 1500s once said, “The essence of sin is that in everything, man seeks for himself, even in God.” This means that the heart of our participation in evil is not so much drug cartels, political corruption, and internet espionage. The nub of evil is our arrogance in reflexively putting ourselves at the center of the universe displacing God. Our core of wrong is making ourselves the measuring stick for all things instead of taking our cues from the One who truly did make everything. The origin of evil is how all things must become about us, how every agenda curves back toward our self-interest.

You've heard that human pride is the great sin around which all other sin gets arranged and sorted. “Enough of me talking about me, what do *you* think of me?” So far history has only seen one exception to our excessive self-absorption. And we resented him so deeply for rebelling against our status quo of self-seeking, we nailed him to a cross.

Jesus tells his parable of the Wicked Tenants to make sense of this mess. Its meaning is so transparent even the temple authorities overhearing it knew that it was about them. The owner of the vineyard—let's call him God—leases out his wine-making operation to tenants—let's call them the house of Israel. Of course, the purpose of any vineyard is to be fruitful. Let's call that fruitfulness God's saving work for all of us redeeming the earth.

The owner sends his servants to check on them. Let's call his servants the prophets, determined to declare God's word among those who refuse to hear it. It is bad enough that the vineyard is not fruitful, as it was meant to be. But those tenants treat the servant

of the owner with the worst contempt and hostility. So also they treat successive servants meant to hold those tenants accountable for their stewardship of the vineyard. Finally, the owner says, "If I send my son to hold them accountable, they'll respect him."

But expecting the best of those tenants, they kill the owner's son. And we get a glimpse into how warped they have become, forgetting the owner's agenda, stuck on their own. For they believe that by killing the owner's son, they'll inherit the vineyard as their own. They believe that because they can't see, touch and face the owner, that he is so far off as to no longer be a player, as to no longer enough care, and as to no longer be a force. Big mistake, is the point of this parable. It's a giant folly bringing out the very worst in us.

The parable is told from the owner's point of view, you will notice. That structure is how it becomes a vivid warning against living selfish what's-in-it-for-me lives. It invites us to first reflect and ponder God's purpose and agenda. God didn't idly give us the gift of life and each of us our unique skill set so that we'd fritter them away, each of us feathering our own nest. God gave them for a specific reason, expecting us to discern and pursue.

Here is an example of what Jesus meant, dating from the Protestant Reformation. In the early 1500's, before Martin Luther nailed his 95 Theses to a cathedral door, the church was in an exceedingly sorry state. According to a historian named Hooper, of the 311 bishops who were asked, only 160 of them could recognize the Ten Commandments. And 24 of those bishops didn't know the origins of the Lord's Prayer, who first said it. Can you imagine? It is like the old joke, do you know who is buried in Grant's Tomb?

What was happening here? It's clear to see. Ordination into ministry or appointment as a bishop had become all about political patronage. It was about paying back favors to influential families, selling power to fill the church's coffers, or seeking church offices as a personal way to "get ahead." Forget servant leaders in Christ's image, they were functionaries, lackeys and minions in a worldly institution that had lost track of why it existed.

This mindset created a straight line to the selling of indulgences, money families spent on departed loved ones to spring their souls from purgatory into heaven. Indulgences were the blasphemous marketing of salvation for the church's worldly gain. Pope Leo X used the proceeds not only to construct today's St. Peter's basilica in the Vatican. The funds were also used in subsequent papacies on carnivals, wars, gambling and hunting.

My teacher, William Muehl, writes, "The church in the Middle Ages had become a kind of spiritual corporation, a community of limited liability, a fictitious entity which stood between men and God, promising the world to both parties." The Reformers asked the question: What is in it for God? Where in the frivolity does the glory of the gospel shine?

As human beings, it is all too easy to take the most basic things for granted. Basic, as in our essential reason for being. Religious leaders in the Jerusalem temple did it when Jesus was alive. It happened again at the end of the Middle Ages. It happens in every generation, which is why Jesus' parable of the Wicked Tenants never loses its potency.

Everyone here knows what atheism means, right? They affirm in a clear, straightforward manner that God does not exist. Actually, I've had productive conversations with them. Have you ever heard of practical atheism? This is much more slippery and problematic.

The practical atheist grants that God is our Maker, that God exists, that God is God. But then that person acts as though none of that really matters in rhythms of daily living. God is so far off that I am effectively in charge of my own life. (Oh, really? How is that working for you, for society?) God doesn't care what we do so long as we are sincere. (A very popular form of sentimentality that makes God into some senile old great uncle.) God has left a void and I am here to fill it with all of my ideas and agendas. (Oh, who died and appointed you God? Apparently, God is effectively dead within such a faith.) Like I said, I've had vivid, clarifying exchanges with atheists, because they are honest. But I have never had one satisfying chat with a practical atheist. It is like running in mud.

A while ago we were planning our church calendar for the program year. After we had plotted all of the youth ski trips and paintballing, the adult parties and fairs, one member whispered afterward, "where is our service to God in all of that?" And my heart soared. My heart soared because if we don't have people in every church asking "what's in it for God?" or "where is the radiance of the gospel in all this busyness?" it is a short road to becoming what Jesus criticized in his parable or what Luther attacked in his 95 Theses.

Our simple acts of mission are saving grace here, like the many at Neighbor Links, serving dinner on Friday night; or having Alan Mathis teach us about substance abuse; or our FMSC weekend packing meals for children we will never meet. They are mission not only in the sense of outreach, loving our neighbor—especially the least and most vulnerable—just like Jesus charged. They're also mission in that they keep us on task, remind us of our core purpose, hold us accountable for our stewardship of this lovely vineyard, make us fruitful for God's purposes and announce that all of us belong to God.

Churches tend to treat works of mission and outreach as the periphery of who we are. "Oh no, here they come again, asking for more money, interrupting what we want to do." In truth, mission and outreach are essential to who we are as the body of Christ below.

So I want to increase the tribe of that person who asked me after that planning session, "What's in it for God in all of this activity? Why can't I see the glory of the gospel in this?" I want us to experiment with spontaneously asking this question, particularly as it feels like what we are doing and the way we are going about it seems somehow in vain. You want to be a rebel? Stop asking what's in it for me or for us; start asking what's in it for God. It subverts meetings or agendas in a holy way, recalling our charter as God's own.

It is a particularly good question for us to ask now that we are beginning to thrive after a few wilderness years, as we find our way into a sweet spot as a congregation. We are never so dangerously arrogant as when we begin winning, as when we feel our success. What's in it for God? Where is the glory of the gospel in all of this? Such accountability proclaims the death of our narcissism and the presence of the Holy Spirit, free and clear. Amen.

Then he began to speak to them in parables. 'A man planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a pit for the wine press, and built a watch-tower; then he leased it to tenants and went to another country. 2When the season came, he sent a slave to the tenants to collect from them his share of the produce of the vineyard. 3But they seized him, and beat him, and sent him away empty-handed. 4And again he sent another slave to them; this one they beat over the head and insulted. 5Then he sent another, and that one they killed. And so it was with many others; some they beat, and others they killed. 6He had still one other, a beloved son. Finally he sent him to them, saying, "They will respect my son." 7But those tenants said to one another, "This is the heir; come, let us kill him, and the inheritance will be ours." 8So they seized him, killed him, and threw him out of the vineyard. 9What then will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and destroy the tenants and give the vineyard to others. 10Have you not read this scripture:

"The stone that the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone;
11 this was the Lord's doing,
and it is amazing in our eyes"?)

12 When they realized that he had told this parable against them, they wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowd. So they left him and went away.