

## **“Who, Me?”**

A Sermon for Sunday Morning Worship  
Blessing of the Backpacks Sunday  
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT  
August 30, 2015  
Text: Luke 20:9-18

I’m guessing it’s pretty obvious by now that we’re thinking a lot about the beginning of the new school year this morning. So, I’m wondering if you have ever had a moment in school – however long ago that might have been – when a teacher asked you a question that you couldn’t answer. Maybe it was because you didn’t do the homework, or you weren’t paying attention at that exact moment so you had no idea what was actually being asked, OR you just had no clue because the material just made no sense. Do you remember that happening to you? And do you remember what your immediate reaction was to being called on? Was it something like, “who, me?” I’m betting it was.

I still remember the moment in geometry class in 10<sup>th</sup> grade when Mr. Vito called on me to put a problem from the homework up on the board for the class to review. Does that still happen in class today? (*pause for responses*) Well, I still remember that moment and being absolutely terrified because I knew what I had down was wrong. I knew it was wrong because our geometry text had the answers in the back of the book and my answer didn’t match that answer in spite of the fact that I had spent two hours

and 2/3's of a box of Kleenex trying to work it out. "Who, me?" I thought, when I realized he was calling on me. I might even have said it out loud, I don't know. In any event, there he was standing up there holding out the chalk for me to take and put the problem on the board. Everything slid into slow motion as I stood up, took the chalk and put my notes on the problem on the board, wrong though they were. By the time I was finished, I was shaking, using every ounce of self-control I had not to cry in front of everybody. I slowly turned around, looking at my shoes. That's when the miracle happened. Mr. Vito looked at my work on the board and said, "Ruth seems to have had some difficulty with this problem. Did anyone else?" That's when I heard all the shuffling so I looked up and I realized every hand in the room was raised. My answer was still wrong, but suddenly I didn't feel like the dumbest kid in the room anymore. And I felt even better when Mr. Vito came over and talked me – and everybody else in the room – through the problem step by step, showing where I had gone off track. Suddenly it seemed so simple! That night I finished my geometry homework in half an hour, leaving my lifelong fear of math behind. My "who, me" had turned into "why not me" by the next geometry class.

That "Who, me?" response is part of the parable we read from the Gospel of Luke this morning. Usually called the parable of the vineyard, this is one of a very few of Jesus' parables which

appears in more than one Gospel. It is unusual in that it relates a pretty horrific story. A landowner planted a vineyard and then leased it to some tenants to tend it for him while he was away on a long trip. After some time, he sent servants back to the tenants to collect what he was due. Three times he sent someone back to the tenants and each time they abused the servant, getting worse in their treatment of the servant each time. Exasperated the landowner finally decides to send his own son to the tenants thinking they would treat him with respect. Instead they kill him knowing that without an heir, they would have a claim against the landowner's land for themselves. The parable ends with a question – “what will the landowner do to the tenants?” – to which Jesus supplies the answer. The landowner will come and destroy the tenants and give the vineyard to someone else.

Now this is not the usual story we tend to associate with Jesus. We like to think of him as telling positive, upbeat stories – like the parable of the mustard seed we discussed last week or the parable of the light under the bushel the week before. We like to think of Jesus of pointing us toward the silver lining in every situation, and often that's just what happens. But not this time. Not in this story. This story is just plain brutal, especially to the audience when he first told it. This is because Jesus told this parable in the Temple in Jerusalem just days before his death. And, he told it in response to being questioned by the Temple

authorities – the chief priests and scribes – who had come up to him to challenge his right to be teaching the people in the Temple. This story was his answer to that challenge.

Knowing that context, it's pretty easy to unpack the symbolism of the story. God is the owner of the vineyard who entrusts it to tenants. The vineyard is God's people. The tenants are the chief priests and scribes themselves. The servants or messengers are the prophets of the Old Testament, all of which were rejected. The son is Jesus. So, in this parable Jesus is saying God is very unhappy with the way the chief priests and scribes are caring for the people entrusted to them so God sends his son to take over the work of teaching the people. But they kill the son to try to steal his birthright only to be subject to God's wrath for their terrible action. God will therefore take the people away from the Temple authorities and give their care to someone else who will do what God wants. Pretty straightforward, right?

Yes, it is. But, that's not what fascinates me about this parable. That's not what grabbed my attention when I read it. I was drawn to the third servant the landowner sent to the tenants. Now, I know this is a parable – a metaphorical story. But I still am fascinated by this character – the third tenant. I mean, what must he have been thinking when the landowner tells him to go to those tenants who have already beaten up the first two messengers, each one worse than the last. “Who, me?” had to

have been his reaction. He had to have been thinking, no way do I want to do this. No way does this end well for me. No way. But he goes. And it is just as bad as he thought it would be.

Same thing with the son. He had to know there was a better than even chance this would not go well for him either. The son had to be thinking, who me? And, in fact, we know that happened to Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane the night he was arrested. He was there on his knees, the disciples snoozing nearby, crying and pleading with God to let this cup pass him by. For hours he prayed and then, in the end, his final prayer was the one which got him through. He prayed, not what I want but what you want, God. Then he surrendered to those who had come to arrest him.

Who, me? How many times in history has that question been asked by folks facing impossible situations? I'm not just thinking about simple situations like putting a math problem on the board that you already know is wrong. I'm talking about those situations that take real courage to face down. I'm talking about the men in those landing crafts on D-Day in World War II. I'm talking about doctors and nurses going into disease infested areas to care for people suffering from horrible, potentially fatal illnesses like Ebola. We all look at these kinds of people – these heroes – and we wonder, how do they do that? How do they move from “who me?” to “why not me?” Where does that courage and strength come from? Each has their own answer, I'm sure.

But what about us? What do we do when we are faced with a situation we don't think we can handle? What do we do when life smacks us right between the eyes with something awful – a job loss, a catastrophic accident involving ourselves or someone we love, the unexpected death of a loved one, a diagnosis of a scary disease whose treatment is unpleasant at best. What do we do when we're faced with a situation that makes us want to scream at the top of our lungs, "who, me?" or "why me?"

We've all been there, right? I know I have. Everybody has, at one time or another, one way or another. And how we answer that "who me" question makes all the difference to how we're able to live our lives in the aftermath of the unthinkable. Consider the story of Raymond Gaspard and Tanya McCrory, survivors of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans. They have built a new life in the midst of what had been the destroyed neighborhood of Arabi, Louisiana. They did it by facing the hurricane's destruction head on. They didn't leave. They stayed and they worked, literally building a new life amidst the debris of the old one. Raymond, who had been a fisherman until his boat was destroyed, got a job clearing debris from the railroad tracks from Brookhaven to Biloxi, Mississippi. Tanya got a job working for the catering company brought in to feed the utility company workers working to restore power to the area. They did whatever odd jobs they could find as the years passed, building a new life moment to

moment. They even became beekeepers when they took work clearing bee's nests out of people's homes as reconstruction of the area began. Instead of just exterminating the bees which would have been easier, they moved the hives into beehives they could tend and now they sell the honey along with the eggs from the chickens living under the back porch of the house they built. If anyone had the right to say, "who me?" it was Raymond and Tanya. But they didn't and that has made all the difference. Where others saw devastation they saw possibility. And they saw one thing more. Grace and blessing. It seems they now see Katrina as giving them a new life they would never have had otherwise.

That, to me, is the real story behind the parable of the vineyard – what happens when we deal with what we thought we couldn't. The three servants and the son didn't walk away from the challenge, the dangers, the impossibilities they faced because they knew the landowner was counting on them. This parable reminds us powerfully, viscerally, that God is counting on us to go where God needs us to go and do what God needs us to do, trusting that God's grace and blessing will abound for us somehow. This parable acknowledges that life is hard, sometimes impossibly so, and yet we have nowhere to go but forward through it, one day at a time, one step at a time. And the thing is, God always has our back. God always goes with us. God always wants

the best for us, giving us what we need to rise to every occasion, finding a way to make honey out of the destructive storms of life. *If* we turn to God in those moments, that is. God is with us, *if* we remember to invite God into those moments instead of relying on our own abilities, our own strengths, our own answers to impossible problems.

God wants to be with us in those moments! God knows we have our limits! God knows we do have a breaking point and sometimes we hit it head on, like Jesus in the garden. And it's in those moments, those shattering moments when we feel so alone, like there's nothing left to do, nothing left inside to draw on – it's those moments when God reaches out to us in surprising and subtle ways. The friend who calls out of the blue just because she was thinking of you. The family member who knows you're having a tough time and brings over those cookies you've loved since you were a child. The church family who mobilizes in prayer like prayer warriors literally surrounding you with God's love and theirs, if only for a few moments. It's in those moments, those impossible moments of pain and redemption, when we discover the truth that every “who me” moment holds the possibility of “why not me” because it's never just me. It's always me and God. Amen.



