

Hurricane Nate arrived at the Gulf Coast last night and this morning, offering yet another crisis to the lives and perspectives of Americans this season. Four hurricanes now, the deadly mass shooting in Las Vegas, all those fires in the West. Earthquakes devastated Mexico, searchers desperately searched for survivors, and now most of the people in Puerto Rico are being told not to expect to have electricity for several more months. Reporters interview victims who tell how their lives have been changed in a matter of hours. "We lost everything, but we are deeply thankful to be alive!" And they interview those whose dear ones' lives were snuffed out in seconds by a sniper or an accident. Each time, I inwardly hold my breath and quietly thank God that this time was not mine or that of my loved ones. But we are all a bit pressed inside, each time made more aware that life pretty much hangs by a thread.

Perspective. Both of our scripture lessons today press us in terms of our own perspectives about our lives and God.

In his early years, Paul, first called Saul, had it all. Everything. He was from a prominent family and was provided the best education available. He studied the Jewish Law under a highly esteemed teacher. He was even blessed to have Roman citizenship, which gave him extra privilege and protection. He was smart, having a strong intellect and firm grasp of his Jewish religion. He had it all and was quite powerful. But one day, as he was persecuting the Christians he felt were a threat to the Jewish faith, he was blinded on a roadside and confronted by the Risen Christ.(Acts 9) From that day on, Paul had a new perspective on everything. In today's lesson, Paul's letter to the Christians at Philippi, Paul listed all his credentials and then declared them inconsequential in comparison with the blessing of knowing Jesus Christ as Lord. Paul's perspective had changed as he came to understand that no matter how blessed or smart or rich or well-connected we may be, we cannot save ourselves.

I guess if the apostle Paul were here today, he might stand up and say, "Wait a minute! You think you have the answers just because you know the story and how things turned out? You don't! I used to think I understood everything that God was doing. I was a gifted student of Judaism and I was smart and articulate and dedicated and had the best connections. But when the risen Lord Jesus challenged me on the Road to Damascus (Acts 9), I found out that I knew nothing. Everything I had was nothing next to the new thing God was doing in my life right then! He made me new! He entered my heart in a new way and nothing was ever the same again. That's what it's all about: the same God who delivered God's people out of slavery in Egypt and who through Jesus gave up everything on the Cross; this same God is working in your wildernesses and your dry lands and your hopeless places right now!! Don't press forward into the tangles and temptations of this world; instead, press forward into the Lord. All you have to do is listen for YOUR call in Christ Jesus! You will discover in your own life the NEW thing God is bringing forth." *(This was borrowed from some commentator years ago, I think, but I do not know who)*

That's why we're here today. Each of us wants to discover in our own life that God is bringing about something new. We tend to feel so old and too predictable. We get upset easily and hold

tightly to our stuff, especially our resentments, hurts and grudges. We want to feel important, we yearn to feel that our lives mean something, but over the years for the most part we have learned not to expect very much in terms of meaning and importance. "Maybe *my* name got left off the God-list... what else is new?"

Let's turn to Jesus' story of the vineyard owner and those disrespectful tenants for a few minutes. First, we need to keep in mind that throughout the Bible the vineyard and good fruit represent God's people and their response to God. God carefully tends the vineyard; God's people too often produce bad or no fruit.

In the story, there was much conflict between the owner and the tenants who lived on the vineyard. The owner sent his servants out to collect the fruit due him, and the tenants beat and killed the servants! Finally, the owner sent his own son, thinking that the tenants would surely respect him. Instead of respecting him, though, the tenants greedily thought that by killing the heir to the vineyard they might acquire it for themselves - so they killed him, too. ... And Jesus asked his hearers: "When the owner himself comes, what will he do to those tenants?"

Now, it may seem odd that the vineyard owner ever let those tenants get as far as they did. If they were tenants, and they did not do what was asked of them – why not just get rid of them? If they mistreated the servants who came to collect the rent, then arrest them and throw them into jail. Why send your son, unless he is able to overpower the tenants? But that's the way *I* think and the way the *world* thinks. God apparently doesn't think like that! In fact, God has chosen NOT to use power to force people – even wicked tenants – to do what is right. Instead, God calls people to do what is right, God reminds people of what we are called to be, God shows people how to have compassion – even if it means sending God's own Son to earth – becoming vulnerable, powerless, dying – so that people might freely choose to do what is right and good. This seems to be the way God works – not wanting to take away a person's freedom, but always asking and yearning for the person to choose justice, mercy, love.

Jesus' story has a message for *anyone* who wants to be a part of the Kingdom of God. As the owner expected fruit from his vineyard, so does the Gospel of Jesus Christ (actually, the entire Bible!) express the expectation that God's people will bear fruit. Jesus warned, "It is not saying 'Lord, Lord,' but doing the will of God that really matters.." (Matthew 7:21) Bearing fruit is doing God's will in this world.

This story is a sharp reminder that there will be a time of accountability, a day of judgment. "When, therefore, the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?"

New or old tenants - there is the distinct warning: Unless the current tenants bear fruit, the kingdom may again be transferred. We are tenants, not owners. Too often we forget this truth, and go through our days thinking we own our own lives. We are so intent on reaching our own goals in life that we forget who we really are, and WHOSE we really are; we forget Who created us and gave us life in the first place. We fail to fully participate in God's kingdom, as individuals and as a church, because we want to be fruit-eaters, not fruit-bearers. (Source of this

statement uncertain) Bearing fruit means living in awareness that *God* is owner, that God expects fruit from my life, and that there will be a time when I will have to account for what I have done with all that has been given me. We will have to account as a church for all that has been given us... Perhaps today's lesson intends to press our perspectives.

When I was in seminary I read a story in a book by Howard Clinebell which is directed pointedly at Christian congregations. Even if I have already shared it with you, we do well to listen to it and apply it to our church and personal lives as followers of Jesus Christ.

On a dangerous seacoast where shipwrecks often occur, there was once a crude little lifesaving station. The building was just a hut, and there was only one boat, but the few devoted members kept a constant watch over the sea, and with no thought for themselves went out day and night tirelessly searching for the lost. Many lives were saved by this little station, so many that it became famous. Some of those who were saved, and various others in the area, wanted to become associated with the station and so gave of their time and money and effort for the support of its work. New boats were bought and new crews were trained. The little lifesaving station grew.

Some members of the lifesaving station were unhappy that the building was so crude and poorly equipped. They felt that a more comfortable place should be provided for those saved from the seas. So they replaced the emergency cots with beds and put better furniture in the enlarged building. Now the lifesaving station became a popular gathering place for its members, and they decorated it beautifully and furnished it exquisitely, because they used it as sort of a club. Fewer members were now interested in going to sea on lifesaving missions, so they hired lifeboat crews to do this work. The lifesaving motif still prevailed in this club's decoration, and there was a liturgical lifeboat in the room where the club initiations were held. About this time a large ship was wrecked off the coast, and the hired crews brought in boat-loads of cold, wet, half-drowned people. They were dirty and many were sick...some were of other races... The beautiful new club was in chaos. So the property committee immediately had a shower house built outside the club so the victims of shipwreck could be cleaned up before coming inside.

At the next meeting, there was a split in club membership. Most of the members wanted to stop the club's lifesaving activities because they were unpleasant and a hindrance to the normal social life of the club. Some members insisted that lifesaving was their primary purpose and pointed out that they were still called a lifesaving station. But they were finally voted down and told that if they wanted to save the victims of shipwreck, they could start their own lifesaving station down the coast. They did.

As the years went by, the new station experienced the same changes that had occurred in the old. It evolved into a club; and then yet another little lifesaving station was founded. History continued to repeat itself, and if one visits that seacoast today, there are a number of exclusive clubs along the shore... (Variously attributed; I found in Howard Clinebell's book)

“By their fruits shall ye know them..” (Matthew 7:16)

May our Lord, the true OWNER of what we know as life, find in each of us fruit-bearers, folks willing to let God challenge and change our perspectives so that we can be active participants in the new Kingdom God is bringing forth, however messy and challenging, even today!

O God, help us, please, to be fruit-bearers. Help us to be freed from whatever is sucking the life and hope out of us. By your grace, make our hearts and ministries new. In Jesus' name. Amen.