

Alpha Dog

Preached Oct. 8 Parable of the Bad Tenants - Matthew 21:33-46

Slide: Luna Comes Home

Three weeks ago, Jim and I brought this little cute fluff ball of a puppy home. Our beloved dog Marty passed away from cancer early in the summer, and being dog people as we are (it's all about the dog, so please indulge me), we couldn't pass up this Doodle puppy when offered to us by former parishioners of mine from Strum.

Slide: Luna Sleeping

Her name is Luna. We call her Luna for a few reasons - having chosen her from a litter of 9 puppies the day after the eclipse, it seemed to make sense. Luna means moon. The color of the moon is also similar to our pup. Furthermore, we are big Harry Potter fans, and in those books, there is a character named Luna Lovegood, who also reminded us of our new, quirky, sometimes crazy but always sweet new puppy.

Of course, we will always miss our Marty, whose namesake of Martin Luther, made sense for him, too. But, Luna is now family. And, true to my word, I warned everyone two weeks ago at the Adult Education class; she would be immediate sermon fodder. Enter sermon number one all about the dog.

Slide: Bad Tenant

Look, I don't like this parable Jesus tells in the Gospel of Matthew any more than you probably do. You might be thinking, Thank God - puppies are more preferable than this story of murder, violence, and absolute disrespect from stupid, greedy tenants, not to mention it seems the Landowner isn't blameless either. This inattentive Landlord seems just like the kind you don't want, never showing up and sending servants and finally his son to the slaughter. Is this the God we really have?

Slide: Luna being shy

Henceforth, puppies...lots and lots of puppies. But, don't worry - there is an allegory here that is integral to the story in the Gospel itself. More on that later.

Slide: Parable of the...

When looking at parables in the Gospel of Matthew, we have to consider to some degree, all the parables up until this point to Matthew chapter 21. So far, we have heard about vineyard workers who get paid the same amount despite how some work longer hours than others. We have heard about servants who ask for mercy for themselves but are unmerciful to others, and last week, we heard a story about two sons, one who said he would not work in the vineyard but did go to work and the other one who said he would go to work, but did not.

And, in today's parable, Jesus, who is clearly referencing the reading we heard from Isaiah today, shows us that everything God

has given for us to use including everything we earn, everything we care for, and everything in the world is to be tended to as if it belonged to God instead of us OR God will give that responsibility to others.

Slide: Parables

These parables, stories, and allegories are about God's Kingdom or at least how God intends God's Kingdom to be both here and beyond. They are fantastic, shocking, and almost unbelievable for a good reason. People tend not to listen otherwise. Therefore, taken together, these stories in the Gospel of Matthew give a clear picture of who God truly is: a God who is merciful and loving, but who, like the owner of a new puppy, who loves their puppy, has to impose boundaries upon that puppy, not because they are mean, but because they want their puppy to socialize well with others, go potty in the correct areas, stay safe and not harm others, and learn to love their master fully. See? Puppies and people are about the same!

Slide: Puppy Latte

Therefore, with Luna in mind, and because I simply tend to see everything through the lens of my dog right now, let's look at who God is in the one parable of today as the ALPHA DOG, who the head of the pack. Every pack has an Alpha Dog, the leader, who determines what the rules are and what behavior is fitting. It's important for me at present to be the Alpha dog over Luna, because you don't want your dog deciding what is appropriate. That is my job. Therefore, just as I am Alpha over Luna, I think of God as being the Alpha over us. After all, God through Jesus Christ, has all authority on heaven and earth. It makes sense.

And, looking at the parable today, I can see what the Alpha dog, Jesus, is attempting to teach us about who God truly is:

Slide: God is patient

- 1) Patience - God is patient

To be a good dog owner, you have to be patient. This is difficult. A puppy is frustrating, full of energy, has a desire to be mouthy, wants to potty in the house, and has a tendency to jump on everything. Teaching the puppy how rules go is the role of the Alpha. But, puppies need a lot of patience from their owners. That means the owner has to make her puppy the number one consideration over other things she would rather be doing - for some time. And, puppies often don't get it right away. They also may regress much later, so patience is everything. So, too, God has patience for us. God gives the vineyard, the entire world, to us to tend forever, hoping that we can be entrusted to it, knowing that we will often be horrible tenants. Still, God chooses to be patient, making us co-creators of the creation, teaching us to be good stewards, even though we often choose not to be.

Slide: Love God Love People

- 2) Boundaries - God has rules

When you have a puppy, boundaries must be established. Why? A puppy needs to know the rules so that she does not run out in the road, knows that biting is wrong, and has good sociability with others. The Alpha teaches her these things for her own safety and for the safety of others. So, too, God establishes boundaries; that is, commandments and laws, so that we will not harm God's creation, not harm the neighbor, and also not harm ourselves. In this story of the vineyard, Jesus is clearly showing that boundaries are necessary for the good of the neighbor and that ultimately, not heeding those boundaries will naturally lead to suffering.

Slide: God is love

- 3) Love – God's devotion is unconditional

A puppy wants to love unconditionally and if you love them, they will do anything for you. So, too, God as the Alpha loves to the point of sacrifice, the sacrifice even of God's own self. You know,

the more I see the dogs I have had in my life and see how like the image of Jesus they are, the more I think that Christ didn't come to be skin and bones with us because we were bad, that somehow we were such stinkers, we needed saving.

Rather, I think that knowing we needed saving, God came because God loved us, wanted to run in the pack with us, and desired to be in relationship. God had to have known that the end result would be our pushing in; our desire to be God, and that our need to dominate would ultimately lead to God's death on a cross. We just can't stand to not be on top. Our sinful nature makes us greedy to won the vineyard, to tend it how we want to exploit it, and to take advantage of God's patience & love while pushing the boundaries God would give us.

Slide: Vineyard Grapes

So, there you have my two cents worth on today's parable. As the Alpha dog, the true Alpha and the

Omega, beginning and end,
God is patient with us, has
rules for us to love the
neighbor and the world God
made, but God also loves us
unconditionally, even when
we, from our own fault, lose
the Kingdom.

Slide: Luna at 11 weeks old

This I learned from
being with my puppy. I hope
all you cat lovers will forgive
me. May we know the
patience of God as we daily
strive to restore the vineyard
for which God gave us to
tend. Amen.