

**you have come to us**

Matthew 21:33-43

March 26, 2017

*Great God of Earth and Heaven*  
(New Century Hymnal, #579)

*Great God of earth and heaven whose Spirit is our breath,  
at Christmastime born human, at Easter shared our death ...*

“Great God of earth and heaven.” Creator, sustainer, provider. Holy.

Great God of earth and heaven. Above us, beyond us, encompassing us. Holy.

Unknowable, unreachable, untouchable. Holy.

Fire, cloud, mystery, glory, awe, awesome, awe-full. Holy!

Beautiful and terrible, wild and astonishing, terrifying and captivating. Holy!

Holy, holy, holy. Oh, my! Great God of earth and heaven.

*Great God of earth and heaven, at Christmastime born human, at Easter  
shared our death ...*

In Jesus Christ, the man of Nazareth, our crucified and risen Savior, you have come to us. Who has come to us? The great God of earth and heaven!

“You have come to us.” This is an astonishing claim. And when we fully appreciate what we know about the great God of earth and heaven, or more accurately, when we fully appreciate what we don’t know about the holy God, the One who is, creator of the universe, great God of earth and heaven, we will understand just how astonishing this claim is.

You have come to us. You. Do you realize how audacious it is for us to address Almighty God as “you?” The One whose very name could not be pronounced or written, the One no one could look upon and live, the One who cannot be seen, but whose presence is somehow intimated, manifested in fire and cloud and earthquake and storm -- you have come to us and lived among us?

Jesus told a story. He told it for the benefit of the pastors and preachers, priests and bishops, rabbis and imams. And they knew it. They knew he meant them when he announced the point of the story:

*The Kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people  
who will produce the proper fruits.*

Taken from them and given to people, unlike them, who will cultivate God's vineyard not just for their own gain, but for God's, too, by giving God his share of the fruits. And what are the fruits we have to share with God? Our lives! Our selves! The fruits of God's Spirit in us: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, humility, self-control.

God has entrusted us, all of us, with this beautiful and fruitful vineyard. He has let it out to us, his tenants, so we might profit from it, enjoy it, make a living, make a life, from it, but also so that he might enjoy it and us, so that he might profit from the good fruits we produce.

That's the point, the whole point of the parable. And yet, there are elements and layers in this story not common in other stories of Jesus. Very few of Jesus' parables are intended as allegories and we do them injustice if we try to press the details, but this story seems different, if not in the way Jesus told it, at least for the churches, like ours, which would later retell it.

Listen again ...

*There was once a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a hole for the wine press, and built a watchtower. Then he rented the vineyard to tenants and left home on a trip. When the time came to gather the grapes, he sent his slaves to the tenants to receive his share of the harvest. The tenants grabbed his slaves, beat one, killed another, and stoned another. Again the man sent other slaves, more than the first time, and the tenants treated them the same way. Last of all he sent his son to them. "Surely they will respect my son," he said. But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, "This is the owner's son. Come on, let's kill him, and we will get his property!" So they grabbed him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him.*

Who is the landowner? Who are the tenants? What is the vineyard? Who are the messengers, the landowners "slaves?" Who is the son?

*Now, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?*

That's the punchline. When the landowner comes, what will he do? What will he do? "Kill those evil men." Whose answer is it?

When the landowner comes. The landowner is God and the landowner is away. Jesus' story portrays God as an absentee landlord. Which is the very way most of us think about God: watching us from a distance, sending us messengers once in a while to give us direction or to check up on us, but remaining himself somewhere else, "up there," "in heaven," at a distance, not here.

But when he does come, someday when he finally does come, what will he do? What do you think he will do? When God comes to us, what do you think he will do? Size you up? Judge you? Express his disappointment in you? Punish you? Send you away? Kill you? Whose answer is that?

Does the landowner make an appearance in Jesus' story? After he leaves at the beginning of the story, does he come back? No, he doesn't. Jesus speaks of it as a future event: when he comes, what will he do?

But consider the question again. Does the landowner make an appearance in Jesus' story? "You have come to us." In Jesus Christ, the man of Nazareth, you have come to us. And where is Jesus in the story?

When the owner comes ... who is killed?

*Great God of earth and heaven, at Christmastime born human, at Easter  
shared our death ...*

In Jesus Christ, the man of Nazareth, our crucified and risen Savior, you have come to us ... and shared our common lot. Beautiful and terrifying! Awesome and astonishing! You have come to us.

And what do we do to you?