

DEFENSIVE LIVING

Pentecost 17, Year A: Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20; Matthew 21:33-46

In going through our home library this summer, Paula came across an old edition of *The Official Bus Handbook*. As some of you know, our Lutheran Adult Fellowship asked me to train for an F Class Driver's License some years ago so that I could take the LAF members on daytrips in a 15-passenger van, affectionately known as the LAFmobile. Every few years, I need to recertify for the license with a written test: Paula knew that this was my recertification year, and pulled the book for me so that I could bone up for the exam.

This week, I was doing what the Brits call "revision," and became interested in a little essay on defensive driving in the book. It caught my attention, because earlier in the week I had been pondering the Ten Commandments from this morning's First Reading and the Parable of the Wicked Tenants from this morning's Gospel. The essay on defensive driving was not that far-removed from the Ten Commandments; and my daily experience on Ontario's roads, with an ever-growing number of aggressive drivers, was not that far-removed from Jesus' parable.

Here is a brief excerpt from *The Official Bus Handbook*, copyright 2002.

The most important concern to a bus driver is the safety of the passengers. Professional drivers who carry passengers must observe the rules of the road...The professional driver looks ahead, thinks ahead, acts early, and drives defensively.

A person who drives defensively

- recognizes possible danger far enough in advance to take preventive action smoothly, with a margin for error.
- makes allowances for the errors of other drivers and pedestrians.
- gives up the right-of-way if it will avoid possible danger to yourself or passengers.
- shows courtesy to other road users.
- drives at a safe speed, slowing when road conditions call for longer stopping distance and greater control.

Most of the Ten Commandments call for that degree of humility, graciousness, and care in our relationships with others. To compare the essay on defensive driving with the Ten Commandments of today's First Reading is not such a huge leap, and not a poor metaphor from our present-day world for why things go horribly wrong so much of the time – in traffic, in our relationships with one another, and in our relationship with the Earth. And perhaps road rage, something not even mentioned by the authors of *The Official Bus Handbook*, is not all that far-removed from the actions of the wicked tenants in Jesus' parable: their sense of entitlement and ownership drives (pardon the expression) their action against the slaves sent by the landowner, and eventually their action against the landowner's son. They don't want to share the road/the vineyard with anyone!

Why does Matthew give this parable such prominence in his gospel?

Well, on one level, the parable has a significant literary value for Matthew; it thickens the plot, so to speak, by anticipating Jesus' fate at the hands of his adversaries, and reveals their anger towards him. It was no secret to them, we learn, that Jesus was comparing the chief priests and Pharisees to the wicked tenants in the parable. "The [chief priests and Pharisees] wanted to arrest him," Matthew writes, "but they feared the crowds, because *they* regarded [Jesus] as a prophet."

On another level, though, Matthew looks beyond the historical context of the account, suggesting that hostility and resistance to God's word as proclaimed by Jesus are more universal than the parable suggests; that there's a chief priest or Pharisee within everyone who refuses living in God's way.

The church is quite gifted in *this* proclamation – so much so that sermons that convict the heart have become something of a cliché. A couple of my critics suggested a few years ago that what

they wanted in the Sunday message was a sharper edge that would cut to the quick of self-righteous Christians, stopping them dead in their tracks. One suggested that he wanted to be brought to ground each Sunday morning for his sins, and then, in the last sentence or two of the oration, scraped up from the floor with something akin to an altar call proclaiming God's forgiveness for those who repent. He knew that that if I did as he wished the toll on the congregation would be considerable; but he felt that at least it would be honest preaching. He had endured, he said, too many affirming sermons; too many sermons that let Jesus' present-day disciples off the hook. A little more grit; a little more like Jesus' conversation with the chief elders and Pharisees in this morning's Gospel. He asked me for a referral to a church more to his liking; and I was hard-pressed to come up with a suggestion, the cliché of convicting sermons notwithstanding.

The reason that I refuse such theatrics in Sunday worship is that I feel there is dishonesty in the attempt to be honest; that Christian worship can all-too-often become detached from its practical application when Christians buy too deeply into the abstracts of individual sin and personal salvation. Surely the suffering and redemption of the world around us is a more authentic call than readying our souls for the Last Day. A while ago, one of our members told me that what he likes about Lutherans is that we keep our feet planted firmly on the ground: that as heavenly-minded as we might enjoy being, there is always a corrective, so to speak, in making a connection with the community; that we love God by loving our neighbour; that we serve God by serving our neighbour.

The connection with this world in today's Gospel occurred to me in the words of the chief priests and Pharisees. After listening to the parable, Jesus asks them, "...when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?" They answered, "He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the harvest time." The spiritually-minded among us, aware of our inner chief priest and Pharisee, make a connection with the Last Day and the judgement of God for those who have not accepted Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour. The earthly-minded among us think of this week's alarming report from the World Wildlife Fund that the world's animal population is now only 52% of what it was in 1970; that the animal population of the world has been cut in half in the last 40 years as people have put unsustainable demands on the planet. The main cause of this huge decrease in animal life is habitat degradation and habitat loss. The second most significant cause is exploitation as the growing human population eats more and more food. The hardest hit number of animals is freshwater species, having declined by 76%; 63% of wildlife living in the tropics have vanished, with Central and South America showing the most dramatic regional decline with a fall of 83%.

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Might Christians learn to *live* defensively, using the humility, graciousness, and care inherent in God's word as our guide? Might the people of the world, Christian and otherwise, consider the World Wildlife Fund report as a warning that we need to love our neighbour as much as we love ourselves, or face a miserable death? The harvest is not ours to consume for ourselves; it belongs to another.

For me, the most practical application of the Christian faith is its capacity for teaching us how to live in the world; how to live in harmony with one another and with Creation. But I fear that we underestimate the value of what we have received in the proclamation of Jesus Christ as very life; I fear that we underestimate ourselves as those who are called to rise above the *status quo* of negligence and magical thinking, the assertion that "everything will work out; it always does;" and

I fear that we underestimate the resistance within ourselves and within others to living God's way of justice and equity.

The world in the hands of Jesus' disciples can do better than end in a miserable death. But we have work to do. We have to leave behind or at least file away all our clichés relating to other-worldliness, and get practical. And then, as those with all the power, wealth, and influence of the wicked tenants, we have abandon our economic and political road rage and learn to live defensively.