

About a year ago, I celebrated Mass for the students at Clearwater Central Catholic High School. Before the Mass began, the director of Campus Ministry asked if I would introduce the “Golden Marauders” who were also in attendance. I said I’d be glad to do so, but asked “who are the Golden Marauders?” I was told that they were folks who graduated from CCC fifty years ago or more. They helped the school in a variety of ways.

As I walked down the aisle accompanied by the singing of the Gathering Hymn, I thought to myself, “those Golden Marauders are old!” Then it dawned on me. I graduated from high school in 1976 - 50 years ago. Yikes!

Two weeks ago, I attended my fiftieth high school reunion. It was wonderful getting together with my classmates, many of whom I hadn’t seen for a long, long time. I was amazed how old some of them looked, but convinced myself that I hadn’t really changed much since my high school days. That bubble burst when more than one classmate asked, “Who are you? Oh yeah. You look so different now!” Double yikes!

During my reunion, I celebrated Sunday Mass with my classmates. In the homily I reminisced how some of my favorite classes in high school were literature courses. Even though I wasn’t much of a reader before my sophomore year in high school, those literature classes opened my mind and heart to something deeper in each novel I read. Those classes also fueled

my desire to read even more – something that has lasted to this day.

In one class, I remember having to read the book Animal Farm. I thought it would be an easy read especially since I liked animals and, being a raised in a big city, farming life intrigued me. But, as I got into the novel, I realized the work wasn't a tale about animals or about farming. It was, rather, an allegory. The story details how the animals of Manor Farm are overworked and mistreated by the farmer. An old boar inspires them to rebel, teaching them a vision of freedom where all animals are equal. When the story concludes, the pigs start walking on two legs, wear clothes, and trade with humans. The original rules are replaced by a single phrase: *"All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others."* The pigs become completely indistinguishable from the human tyrants they overthrew.

As I said, the novel is an allegory. It was originally written to show the brutality of Soviet totalitarianism. But the lessons of the novel can be applied to events happening in any day or age. When I first picked up the book, I never would have guessed what it was about from the title.

Today's gospel presents a similar problem. The story we hear from the 23rd chapter of St. Matthew is titled "The Parable of the Tenants." Initially we might think that title indicates this is a story about people who rent a house. But these folks are tenant farmers. They pay rent to an owner of the land in the form of the crops they raise. Like the novel Animal Farm, the tenant farmers are angry about their perceived subservience to the owner of the

land and seek radical change – against the owner, his employees, and especially against the owner’s son.

As with the novel Animal Farm, the parable Jesus tells is an allegory. While it speaks to issues affecting the people in Jesus’ day, the meaning behind the story can be applied to people and communities in every age. In the parable, Jesus zeroes in on what he perceives as a lack of integrity and a lack of morality among many.

At the very beginning of the parable, we hear Jesus addressing the chief priests and elders of the people. Both groups – the religious leaders and elders – are the ones who held power in the community. They seem to control everything and are using religion and their positions of power to suppress those around them in order to make a profit for themselves.

The people of Jesus’ day would also understand that the owner of the vineyard symbolized God the Father. The owner supplied everything that the tenant farmers needed to harvest a bumper crop – choice vines, a hedge to protect the vineyard from destruction by animals or outside forces, a wine process where they could process their harvest, and a watchtower which would provide an added layer of security to the operation. Jesus intended to teach that the tenant farmers had everything they needed and more. But, as with many people, they weren’t satisfied with what had been graciously bestowed upon them. They were not good stewards of their many blessings.

Jesus continues by telling his audience the awful things the tenant farmers did. They thought that by using violence and

even murderous threats they would get more. But even we know how pointless that is. Those who act as bullies, those who instigate violence for their own gain, those who seek to suppress or have murderous intentions will always lose in the end.

If you have seen any political ads in the past few weeks, I'm sure you've noticed that almost every single commercial accuses political opponents of using their position and power to enrich themselves or advance themselves to the next level of government.

But such behavior isn't limited to politics. It can also infect the Church. Think of those throughout the Church's history who used their power to financially enrich themselves or worse. While it is easy to point a finger at politicians or even leaders in the Church for wanting to advance themselves over the mission of serving others, we as individuals are not immune from engaging in behavior that might be similarly sinful.

I'm sure there are times when many of us seek to serve self rather than using our gifts and talents to serve others in God's Kingdom. I'm sure at times we have taken advantage of others, suppressed them, or even destroyed the reputations of others (or worse) for our own personal gain. This is the story Jesus is telling us today. And this is the warning he raises to anyone who uses another for their own personal gain.

As with all good allegories, this one should challenge us. First, we are challenged to see all things as gifts from God. Secondly, Jesus' parable reminds us that these blessings are to be used to help others. Finally, Jesus warns all of us that selfishness, self-

service, and any form of oppressing others for whatever reason (especially for personal gain) have no place in the Kingdom of God.

During my prayer time each morning, I read a reflection written by Fr. Richard Rohr. Fr. Richard often refers to a single topic in many of his reflections. He speaks out against a concept known as *dualism* – that is, the tendency to look at our practice of the faith as being something separate from every other part of our lives. While assuming they are faithful Catholics, dualists don't let their faith guide their politics; dualists end up separating their faith from how they conduct business; and while dualists even pray they often don't allow their prayer to affect how they interact with and treat others. I believe Fr. Richard captures the spirit of the allegory that Jesus intended to teach in today's gospel parable. He reminds us that our faith must be the foundation of all we are and do. Our faith must be the thing that guides all our decisions, how we conduct business, and how we relate to one another. If we are an elder, a religious leader, a political figure or an everyday Catholic, we can never separate our faith life from any other aspect of our lives. Jesus demands that all these things must work together.

That's what Jesus was talking about in today's parable. That is the allegorical nature of the parable he told. While his words were directed at the political and religious leaders of his day, he directs those same remarks to us.

While I am officially old – as confirmed by having just attended my fiftieth high school reunion - I hope at this point of my life I am becoming better at this one thing – that is, living out Jesus'

call to integrate my faith with everything I am and do. Anything less is not worthy of the Kingdom of God.