

SELLING ONE'S BIRTHRIGHT IN MAMET'S "GLENGARRY GLEN ROSS"

A Sermon by Dean Scotty McLennan

University Public Worship

Stanford Memorial Church

July 10, 2011

The lectionary reading from the gospel of Matthew todayⁱ begins three weeks of lessons with Jesus teaching in parables. He's speaking to a large crowd on the beach as he's standing in a boat nearby on the Sea of Galilee. It's almost like a play at the theatre, with Jesus on his boat stage and the audience before him in their seats. There's a narrative, since parables are kinds of fictitious stories, which have metaphorical meaning,ⁱⁱ and here Jesus describes what happens when a farmer goes out and sows seed in different types of soil. Some seed is eaten by birds right away. Other seed grows briefly on rocky ground but then withers after being scorched by the sun. There's seed which produces plants that are choked by thorns, and finally there's seed which grows from good soil to yield lots of grain. In this case, unlike what he does with many of his parables, which are left for the listener to figure out, Jesus explains the metaphors exactly: The seed is analogous to the word of the imminent coming of the kingdom of God, which isn't understood by some, is abandoned by others when it becomes troublesome, is choked by the lure of wealth in a third case, and finally is understood by a fourth group of people, who then flourish with it.

This New Testament reading is linked in the lectionary today to an Old Testament or Hebrew Bible reading from Genesis about the twin brothers Jacob and Esau. Esau was born first, just by minutes, but by the rules of patriarchal primogeniture of ancient Israel, Esau had the exclusive right of inheritance to everything his father owned.ⁱⁱⁱ Jacob was able to convince Esau to sell him that birthright for a pot of stew, though, when Esau thought he was literally dying of hunger. So, is Esau's sale of his birthright like seed that was snatched by birds, or like seed that fell on rocky ground and withered soon after it sprung up, or like seed that was choked by thorns?

What does it take not to sell one's birthright, to grow up and flourish, and ultimately to inherit the kingdom of God?

I think David Mamet's comedic play *Glengarry Glen Ross*,^{iv} winner of the 1984 Pulitzer Prize for drama, provides helpful insights into these four possibilities through four of its characters. On one level they're all pretty sorry individuals in their own ways, but one of them does manage to rise from the morass they all find themselves in long enough to demonstrate that there might be some hope for him in the future. This play went on to become a critically acclaimed movie some ten years later in the 1990's, with a star-struck cast that included Al Pacino, Kevin Spacey, Alec Baldwin, Jack Lemmon, Alan Arkin, Ed Harris and Jonathan Price.^v

The drama is about real estate salesmen in a firm with a draconian incentive structure, which insures that although the top seller for the year will win a new Cadillac, the majority of the others will lose their jobs by not successfully pushing enough of their product. All of the characters are male in this play, and they are all so foul-mouthed that few of their lines can be repeated in a church without expurgation (which I will dutifully provide). Their exchanges can be wickedly funny, but they also reveal aspects of American business at its worst.

My candidate for the seed that's immediately eaten by birds is Shelley Levene. The play begins with his complaining to his immediate boss that he's not getting any good leads from him in order to make sales. When his boss explains that Shelley hasn't capitalized on good leads in the past, Shelley makes excuses for why he didn't close the last four he was given. Then Shelley begins swearing at his boss, claiming he doesn't know how to do his job and outrightly insulting him. By the end of the first scene he's actually trying to bribe his boss -- under the table he'll give the boss 10 per cent of whatever he closes if he gets some good new leads, which company policy says should be going instead to the higher producers. His boss is no angel himself, we soon learn, as he asks for

20 percent of whatever Shelley earns, plus fifty dollars per lead up front. But we suspect Shelley isn't long for the company, and that turns out to be right.

Ricky Roma is currently the most successful of the salesman, and it looks as if he's going to get the Cadillac. He also seems to have a robust theory of business and of life to sustain him. Here's some of what he expounds to a prospective client whom he befriends in the booth next to him one night at a restaurant: "What is our life? (*Pause*) It's looking forward or it's looking back. And that's our life. That's *it*. Where is the *moment*? (*Pause*) ... How can I be secure? (*Pause*). Through amassing wealth beyond all measure? No. ... I do those things which seem correct to me *today*. I trust myself. And if security concerns me, I do that which *today* I think will make me secure. And every day I *do* that." Then Ricky goes on to discuss real estate he wants this prospective client to buy. He explains what it represents: "An opportunity. To what? To make money? Perhaps. To *lose* money? Perhaps. To 'indulge' and to 'learn' about ourselves? Perhaps ... [It's] an *opportunity*... What does it mean? What you *want* it to mean."^{vi}

But Ricky's philosophy of life turns out to be as shallow as the soil over rocks. He convinces this client to buy a piece of development property in Florida as an investment, but after the client goes home, sleeps on it overnight, and talks to his wife, he realizes it isn't something he needs. Then Roma's true colors come out when the customer arrives at his office the next morning to cancel. He begins lying to the customer, pretends that another real estate agent in his office is a client who's successfully bought property from him, and claims he can't talk because he's late for a plane. But the customer cancels the deal, and the seed Ricky has sown has withered before him in the sun.

Dave Moss is the salesman who sows seeds among thorns. He's so lured by wealth that he's willing to set up an overnight break-in of the real estate office, have the leads stolen from his boss's

office, and pass them on to a competitor for whom he's then going to work. There's a wonderful scene where he tries to lure another salesman, named George Aronow, to join him in the plot:

[Dave says]: "The pressure's just too great... 'I got to *close* this...[sale], or I don't eat lunch,' 'or I don't win the *Cadillac*' ... 'You *lose*, then we fire you'... No. It's *medieval*... it's wrong..."

[George agrees]: "Yes."

[Moss then begins talking about the competitor's situation]: "Look at Jerry Graff. He's *clean*, he's doing business for *himself* ... Why take ten percent? ... Why are we giving the rest away? ... For some jerk sit in the office and tell you 'Get out there and close.' 'Go win the Cadillac.' Graff. He goes out and *buys* ... He pays top dollar... you see?"

[Again George agrees]: "Yes."

[After some more banter, Dave tries to rope George into his scheme]:
Someone should stand up and strike *back*.

What do you mean? ...

Should do something to *them*.

What?

Something. To pay them back. (*Pause*.) Someone, someone should hurt them...

Someone should hurt them.

Yes.

(*Pause*) How?

How? Do something to hurt them. Where they live.

What? (*Pause*.)

Someone should rob the office.

Huh.

That's what I'm *saying*... If we were that kind of guys, to knock it off, and *trash* the joint, it looks like robbery, and *take* the ... leads out of the files ... Go to Jerry Graff.

[A long period of pauses ensues, along with talk about the value of leads, whether Jerry Graff would take them or not. Then there's this verbal dance:]

[George asks:] ...I mean are you actually *talking* about this, or are we just...

[Dave replies:] No, were just...

[George:] We're just '*talking*' about it.

[Dave:] We're just *speaking* about it. (*Pause*) As an *idea*.

As an idea.

Yes.

We're not actually *talking* about it.

No.

Talking about it as a ...

No.

As a *robbery*.

As a 'robbery'?! *No*. ...

[Later, Dave renews the verbal dance:] ...We're just *talking*...

[George] We are?

Yes. (*Pause*)

Because, because, you know, it's a *crime*.

[Now Dave is emboldened:] That's right. It's a crime. It is a crime. It's also very safe.

[George replies:] You're actually *talking* about this?

[And now Dave admits] That's right. (*Pause*)

Eventually Dave asks George to be the one physically to commit the robbery, since Dave has contributed the hard work of setting up the aftermath, including jobs for them, with Jerry Graff. George refuses. Then Dave says he's already an accomplice under the law because they've talked about it: "In or out. You tell me, you're out you take the consequences." George asks: "I do? ... and why is that?" Dave responds, "Because you listened," and the scene ends.^{vii}

It's George whom I consider to be the only candidate in the play for the kingdom of God, the only character who doesn't sell his birthright, the only one who provides good soil that will actually bring forth fruit. He doesn't commit the robbery (which actually occurs) and he doesn't go in with Dave, even though he's been told he's an accomplice anyway. And even though he knows that he'll be fired anyway for not making enough real estate sales.^{viii} Instead, he comes back to the office and encourages another real estate agent who hasn't been doing well either.^{ix} George isn't a saint, but he does have what Jesus asks for -- ears that listen for the truth. He actually understands the right thing to do, he doesn't fall away when he's facing trouble, the lure of wealth doesn't choke him, and although the fruit he yields might not be a hundredfold nor sixtyfold, maybe it could be said to be thirtyfold.

One of the literary critics of *Glengarry Glen Ross* says that its author may seem to espouse no creed and may appear to be making a dispassionate observation of the nature of capitalist society. However, as Benedict Nightingale puts it, ultimately David Mamet doesn't "accept that the world of *Glengarry Glen Ross* is fixed and unalterable. He sees the loss. He laments the waste. He

knows things could and should be otherwise."^x Jesus calls us to a new creation that lies before us, if only we would listen to his word.

BENEDICTION

The courage of the early morning's dawning,
And the strength of the eternal hills,
And the peace of the evening's ending, and the love of God,
Be in our hearts, now and forevermore. AMEN.

(Anonymous)

NOTES

ⁱ Matthew 13: 1-9, 18-23.

ⁱⁱ *New Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), Vol. VIII, p. 299; *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* (Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, 1997), p. 841.

ⁱⁱⁱ *The Oxford Bible Commentary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 55.

^{iv} David Mamet, *Glengarry Glen Ross* (New York: Grove Press, 1982).

^v *Ibid.*, back cover.

^{vi} *Ibid.*, pp. 48-50.

^{vii} *Ibid.*, pp. 30-46.

^{viii} *Ibid.*, p. 56.

^{ix} *Ibid.*, p. 64.

^x Benedict Nightingale in Christopher Bigsby (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to David Mamet* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 102.