

## *Wicked Tenants & a Gracious Owner: A reflection on Matthew 21:33-46*

Cathy Warner October 4, 2020

I have to tell you, that with everything going on in my life and in the world right now, I was hoping to encounter a comforting and uplifting gospel passage when I launched the Lectionary Page on my computer last Sunday night to read this week's lesson. Today's reading is a continuation of the scripture Fr. Steve preached about last week, where Jesus employs the old testament vineyard metaphor as he responds to the leaders of the synagogue questioning him about the source of his authority.

As wildfires continue to ravage the west, and the corona virus has infected the highest levels of our government, I was hoping for simple reassurance from the scriptures. A "God loves you," sound bite. What I got was violent and depressing. Killings, stoning, and crushing. Words that require chewing over carefully.

This week I read a dozen commentaries, hoping that someone else would offer insight that could turn this scripture passage into the warm fuzzy spiritual hug I was craving. I can't say I found that exactly. But I did gain an understanding of the context and original purpose of this difficult passage that's often called "the parable of the wicked tenants."

Daniel J. Harrington, a professor of New Testament at Boston College before his death, wrote this in *America Magazine* [September 29, 2008:

*The parable is clearly a kind of allegory. The landowner is God, the vineyard is Israel as God's special people, the tenants are the political and religious leaders of Israel, the harvest is the fullness of God's kingdom and the judgment that will accompany it, the servants sent to collect the landowner's produce are the prophets, and the landowner's son is Jesus.*

*The parable begins by describing God's extraordinary care for the vineyard in terms clearly alluding to Isaiah 5 [which was our first reading this morning]. When the tenants abuse the servants and the son, the owner comes and destroys the wicked tenants.*

*In Matthew's context this is very likely an allusion to the destruction of Jerusalem not only in 587 B.C. but also in A.D. 70. Note, however, that the vineyard itself is preserved and placed under new management. The problem that Jesus and Matthew had was not with the owner (God) or the vineyard itself (God's people). Rather, it was with the tenants (the leaders).*

*Christians believe that through Jesus' life, death and resurrection the people of God have come under new and different leadership from that of the Jewish chief priests and elders.*

As Christians, I suppose we're "under new management" but I also think after 2,000 years of institutionalizing the church, we ought not to be too smug or self-righteous in thinking we don't face the same judgment as the original tenants.

How different are we from the chief priests and pharisees with our rules, regulations, and rituals that can work to keep the fruits of God's kingdom from thriving as they should? How are we any different from the religious elite who were tied to the empire, who bent their beliefs and practices to stay in good graces with government authorities? When Christianity has become synonymous with a state sanctioned me first piety? When wealth and power are concentrated in the hands of the very few, while millions are victims of poverty and disenfranchisement?

And how do we react when we're called to account for our actions as citizens of this planet, this country?  
As family members and individuals?

When we're told that our behaviors are harming the planet, oppressing others, running counter to God's will? How do we react to the words of our modern day prophets?

In the last sentence of this passage we read: “When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they realized that [Jesus] was speaking about them. They wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowds, because they regarded him as a prophet.”

In this regard I’m no different from the pharisees and chief priests. My default reaction is to become defensive when I feel threatened. To protect myself, my worldview, my behaviors. I’d like my critics to go away, to be arrested, to be silenced.

But if I allow myself to step back from my ego’s desire to be right, and to move past my instinctive reactions, I can give myself time to consider what’s been said and how I should respond. That’s not easy, especially if it means admitting I’m wrong and changing how I think and behave.

For me, this is the essence of repentance. It seems easier to practice this individually with regard to personal issues, but the text makes clear that repentance must happen as a community. And if our community leaders can’t model this behavior of turning back to God, then we all stumble.

And we’re stumbling against the rocks. Hard. Communities are fractured by politics and pandemic, by the language we use about whose lives matter, by what we say and think in response to challenges to our identity. I don’t know what’s going to happen in response, but there are moments when I feel as though I’m watching unsustainable systems that we’ve ordered our communal lives around collapse.

I wonder how the pharisees felt as they try to maintain their practices, defend their policies, and silence their critics—in this case Jesus. At this moment, they don’t arrest him in deference to crowd opinion, but soon, when they can no longer ignore the threats to their identities and practices, they will. And Jesus knows it. Has told them so in this parable.

We can cling to our positions. Or we can choose to change when confronted with uncomfortable truths. We can try to hang on to our power and privilege by force. But none of that will stop God from God’s work toward reconciliation and justice. It’s uncomfortable and scary when it feels as though our foundations

are crumbling, when God's good news feels like bad news is coming personally for us. When things get worse before they get better.

I'm uncomfortable and scared when I don't know what's going to happen next. But even in that state, there is hope. As Professor Harrington wrote:

*These vineyard texts insist that God remains in personal relationship with [God's] people, continues to care for and preserve them and stays faithful even when the people fail to do so.*

*The... parable... teaches us to look forward in hope to the fullness of God's kingdom under the guidance of the risen Jesus as Emmanuel, the one who promises to be with us until the end of this age (Mt 28:20).*

God is faithful when we fail God. May that glimpse of good news sustain us in these challenging days.