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The Fifth Sunday in Lent, Year C (Luke 20:9-19)

Church of the Ascension, Chicago, IL

Of Jesus's parables, this is, perhaps, one of the most straightforward. In this story, the owner of the vineyard is God and his vineyard is the land of Israel. The tenants who occupy this land during the Lord's departure are the priestly officials of Jerusalem, those who have been charged as stewards of this land.

While the owner of the vineyard is away, God sends His prophets. These are the servants who are dispelled from the vineyard empty-handed, each time with increasing severity and violence done to them.

After the last prophet has been wounded and thrown out, the vineyard owner asks, "What shall I do? I will send my beloved Son; perhaps they will respect Him." God sends his beloved Son, Jesus, into the vineyard, the land of Israel, where these ruthless tenants throw him out and kill him, hoping to steal the master's inheritance for themselves.

We cannot help but be horrified by these blood-thirsty tenants—by their greediness and hardness of heart.

Jesus tells this parable as he is surrounded by these very tenants—the chief priests, scribes, and leaders—who are at that very moment engaged in a plot to kill him. The end of his story is not to their liking: "What then will the owner of the vineyard do to them? He will come and destroy those tenants and give the vineyard to others"

"Heaven forbid!" they cry out, perhaps in this exclamation feeling some genuine fear for their future, or maybe none at all. Like the tenants of the vineyard, they believe that in killing Jesus, they will be rid of him. By removing him from the vineyard and dirtying some other ground with his blood, that they preserve a stolen plot for themselves.

It is clear to all around Him exactly who Jesus is rebuking, and he goes on, quoting Psalm 118: "The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone."

Jesus knows that he is the Son of the owner of the vineyard, the stone the builders will throw away, the lamb who will be sacrificed on the cross. God has sent him into this den of wolves who gather around him, waiting for an opportunity to pounce.

He stands before these very wolves and warns them: "Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces: and it will crush anyone on whom it falls." The son who was sent into the vineyard may have seemed weak to the tenants; he was outnumbered, his father was nowhere near to protect him—he was helpless before their physical power and domination and was not only brutalized by them, but killed. The tenants must have thought themselves mighty, they must have thought the son weak.

Jesus knows what the tenants do not, and what the apostles even struggle to understand. The brute force of man—of domination and exertion—is no match for God’s power. Jesus tells this to them in a language they can understand, the language in which war, violence, and politics of sheer power are all spoken. “Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces.”

All across the world, throughout history and in our present age, we see the use, and the consequences of, this power. In one person killing another for money, revenge, or reputation; in tank rounds and mortar shells burying children in rubble. In the petty tyranny of political opponents squabbling for celebrity and reward, indifferent to those they have sworn to represent and the common good they are duty-bound to serve.

But God’s divine power is not some mere extension of our own—the capacity to dominate, devour, and destroy—his power is far greater and of a different nature entirely.

Jesus is God’s beloved son, and he is sent into the vineyard, sent into this world, to die. While it may seem to us cruel, even wrongheaded, that the vineyard owner sends his son, alone, back into a land which has left so many prophets bruised, bloodied, and empty-handed, the owner calls him “my *beloved* son,” and we are meant to believe him.

Jesus is broken by the tenants, by the priests and scribes who seek to kill him, by the world which watches on. He is loved by God. As Jesus tells us, those who are responsible for Jesus’s death will be broken open, bashed against the cornerstone of Christ. They, too, are loved by God. We, in our brokenness and sinfulness, are loved by God.

This is what makes God different from the invader and the conqueror. In his mercy and love, he shows us the possibility of a different kind of brokenness. One which allows us to confront those parts of ourselves which most resemble the tenants and of which we are most ashamed. In this brokenness, Christ makes possible New Life.

Amen.