



Lectionary 27, Year A

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19th Sunday after Pentecost: Gospel Text - Matthew 21:33-26

Matthew 21:33-46

[Jesus said:] ³³ "Listen to another parable. There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a winepress in it, and built a watchtower. Then he leased it to tenants and went away. ³⁴ When the harvest time had come, he sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his produce. ³⁵ But the tenants seized his slaves and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. ³⁶ Again he sent other slaves, more than the first, and they treated them in the same way. ³⁷ Then he sent his son to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.' ³⁸ But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, 'This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance.' ³⁹ So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him. ⁴⁰ Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?" ⁴¹ They said to him, "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."

⁴² Jesus said to them, "Have you never read in the scriptures:

'The stone that the builders rejected

has become the cornerstone;

this was the Lord's doing,

and it is amazing in our eyes'?"

⁴³ "Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces its fruits. ⁴⁴ The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces, and it will crush anyone on whom it falls."

⁴⁵ When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they realized that he was speaking about them. ⁴⁶ They wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowds, because they regarded him as a prophet.

SERMON TEXT:

It's kind of unsettling, isn't it? A man sends some of his servants to collect his share of the harvest from the tenants that he has leased his vineyard to...when the tenants kill the servants, the landlord doesn't send in an army to retaliate but instead sends more servants who meet the same fate. Again, the landlord doesn't seek revenge or send army or guards or even a small gang of men out to the tenants to deal with the tenants and collect the landlords share of the harvest...instead, he sends his son. The tenants foolishly think that if they remove the son from the scene, they might be the recipients of his inheritance...the vineyard...so they throw him out of the vineyard and kill him too.

But why is this story so unsettling? Depressing even? Is it because of the actions of the father to send more servants to meet the same fate as the first servants? Is it because he then sends his son into that dangerous situation to meet the same fate as the servants? As a land owner, he was obviously a wealthy person, being able to be an absentee land lord, leasing out land and then go to a distant country...he could have just as easily hired an army

or at least a small group of intimidating men to go to the tenants and collect what the landlord was owed. Or he could have just gone himself. He didn't have to send his son, or even the second group of servants.

Or is this parable so unsettling because the tenants have an all too familiar attitude.

While it is true that the behavior of the landlord is definitely hard to accept because he was willing to sacrifice more of his servants after the first group had been killed...it may be even harder to accept that he was willing to send his son into the mix after seeing what had happened to both groups of servants. The attitude of the tenants should be the behavior that gives us the wakeup call, though. The tenants have entered into a lease agreement with the landlord and then, between entering into the lease and harvest time, they become convinced that the vineyard that they are leasing is theirs to do with as they please. They begin to believe that this absentee landlord doesn't deserve his cut of the harvest...but maybe, just maybe, if they remove his son from the

picture, they will be rewarded with his inheritance and be able to live high on the hog from here on out.

But what do these tenants have to do with us that would give us a wakeup call? We certainly are not tenants in a vineyard. Well, this may be so in a literal case...but if you were to think of this world as God's vineyard, then yes, we are tenants in a vineyard...and because sin has entered into the picture, we have come to believe that this vineyard is ours to do with as we wish. Over the years, we have polluted the water, the land and the air, we have brought on greater disparity between the rich and the poor and have denied justice to the most vulnerable among us. And when God sends prophets into our midst to help us see where we have gone wrong, we either ignore them or send them a painful message that we're in charge now and we don't need anyone's help to get us out of the mess we are in. That was certainly the reality for the prophet Isaiah, and the apostle Paul and it was also what we attempted to tell Jesus. We don't like God's servants, his prophets, coming and telling us what we do not want to hear...that we have forgotten the truth of God's reality, either because we chose to forgot it or because it is so hard to carry out

that we ignore it until it seems to go away. But in order for that to happen, those prophets need to go away too. And so we cut the Isaiah's in two, we behead the Paul's and assassinate the Martin Luther King Jrs....because when their voices are silent, we can live in blissful ignorance running things the way we want them run...giving to our landlord only when we see fit and how much we see fit.

But the parable of the wicket tenants didn't end with the death of the landlord's son, it ended with a question. Now when the owner of the landlord comes, what will he do with those tenants? And we are offered two suggestions. The first suggestion is that the landlord will come and deal those tenants a miserable death and then rent out his land to other tenants. Notice that this suggestion is not offered up by Jesus, but by the religious leaders...the very ones whom this parable is aimed at. Retaliation was a very real reality then, just as it is now...which is why in the old testament we hear about eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth...this code actually limited the level of retaliation that could take place...so if someone knocked out your tooth, the most harm you could do to them would be to take that same tooth from their mouth.

Jesus, however, offers up another solution. One in which the landlord does not give up on the tenants or sink to their level. The solution that Jesus offers is that it was necessary for the son to be rejected so that he might become the foundation of what is to come. He takes his words from the Psalms "the stone which the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. This is the Lord's doing; and it is amazing in our eyes." What Jesus is offering up is an alternative to what comes naturally to humans...an alternative in which the landlord so desires to have a relationship with his tenants that he is willing to risk everything, his servants, even his own son, so that he can reach out to them. Retaliation is not an option to the landlord, only love...crazy, unreasonable, unfathomable love.

These texts from Matthew that we have heard in the last weeks and will be hearing in the next few weeks are incredibly dangerous...they invite the temptation of self-vindication...they invite an attitude of "you got what you had coming." But that's not what Jesus is about, it's not what God's about...that's not what the Gospel is about, even if we have to do what Martin Luther said is necessary sometimes...squeeze a text until gospel leaks out of it.

Jesus cannot help but share the good news of the Gospel, even in challenging texts like the one for today.

As inhabitants of God's vineyard, it is incredibly tempting to forget that we are just tenants and that can lead us to behavior that is self-serving and dangerous. It can lead us to hoard the gifts that we have been given by God and it can lead us to want to silence the prophets among us to remind us of the hard work that comes with being God's people, the tenants of God's vineyard. But as people of God, we are called to do the hard work of tending God's vineyard and producing good fruits, justice, righteousness, equality, love. We are called to never give up on this work because we have a God who has never given up on us. God is willing to give us an infinite number of chances, knowing that we cannot be forced into anything. God has a crazy, unreasonable, unfathomable love for us, a love that is willing to risk anything to have a relationship with us. A love so strong that God was willing to destroy his choicest vine in order that life may become available to us.

As Christ hung from the cross, God stood at the foot of that cross with dirty, blistered hands, holding a wilted vine and hurting from the pain of his son, knowing that the rejection of his son by the people was not the end of the vineyard...it was just the beginning.

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