

Pentecost 16

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In the parable just read Jesus tells a story about wicked tenants to remind us what is expected of us. He begins by describing a common practice in first century Palestine. A landlord plants a vineyard and leases it out to tenants. A deal is struck that, at the time, seems to be a win-win for both the landlord and the tenants. The tenants will manage the vineyard and when the harvest is complete will share a portion of the final crop with the landlord. They shake hands and each go their own way.

The tenants put a fence around the vineyard. They build a watchtower and get busy tending the vines. Over time they dig a winepress in anticipation of the harvest. Day after day they go into the vineyard to prune the vines, fertilize and keep the rows clean of weeds. They struggle with pests that are attracted to the vines and try to attract beneficial pollinators. They work in the hot sun, they even have to work in the rain. Day in and day out by the sweat of their brow the vineyard is cared for with hopes of producing a bountiful harvest.

All the while, the landowner returns to his comfortable home. While the tenants are out in the vineyard slaving away, the landowner goes off on a Mediterranean cruise. It is obvious, the landowner has more than enough since he does not have to slave away day after day to tend his vineyard.

The time comes to harvest the grapes and the tenants renege on the rent they owe the landowner. How come? Was the agreement not a fair one in the first place? Did the tenants come to realize the agreement benefited the landowner more than themselves? Did the tenants just get greedy? We are not told. Most deals between absentee landowners and tenants are not perfect. The fact that there might be some friction is understandable. Lopsided as the deal might have been, the landowner afforded the tenants the opportunity to make a living. The alternative was to beg on the streets and hope other people would be merciful. Three times the landowner sent messengers to collect his due. Three times the tenants treated those sent with violence.

The landowner did not accept their ruthless message. He was no pushover and he was not going to abide violence so the tenants could have things their way. So he persists. He does not send a squadron of police officers to enforce the agreement he has with the tenants. He does not even consult his attorney about the best way to force the tenants to pay up. No, he sends his son saying, "Surely, the tenants will respect my son." How naïve can this landowner be?

The tenants have already been given three chances to do what is right and pay what they agreed to pay when they leased the vineyard. Seeing the son coming the tenants lick their chops. This is indeed the "lamb being sent to the slaughter." As opportunistic as they are ruthless, the tenants take advantage of the good will of the landowner by seizing his son, throwing him out of the vineyard and killing him. And they feel justified in doing so. The son of the landowner had it coming to him. He and his father had been enjoying the fruits of someone else's labor for far too long. It was time someone taught them a lesson.

Jesus turns to the crowd and asks, "What will the landowner do when he comes to those tenants?" It seems fairly obvious to anyone who is fair minded. "He will put those wretches to a miserable death and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at harvest time." In other words, the landowner will do what any powerful, well connected, intelligent man would do. He will seek vengeance to the max. He will demand nothing less than the death penalty for those unscrupulous thugs. He is certainly justified in doing so.

Up to this point the listeners did not realize this parable is an allegory. They know the people of Israel are referred to as "the vineyard of the Lord." They did not question the fact that the owner is God. The wicked tenants had to be the leaders of the people who chastised Amos and exiled him for speaking God's truth. The ones who beat Jeremiah, arrested him, put him in stocks and threw him into a cistern to starve to death all for proclaiming the will of God. All that began to make sense when they thought about Jesus' parable. What they did not know until much later was the "son of the landowner" was the one teaching them. The drama of this parable unfolded before their very eyes.

The idea of Israel rejecting God stands at the heart of this parable. This rejection of God takes many forms today. First, there are those among us who simply declare there is no God. They see beauty and order all around them, they acknowledge the power and splendor of the universe but they deny any obligation to the source of this arrangement. They attribute creation to some random sequence of unregulated circumstances that just happened.

Membership in all Christian denominations is declining as more and more people declare themselves “spiritual but not religious.” They do not want to be part of a fellowship that is identified as a church for a variety of reasons. They do not want to wrestle with the story of God’s people. They do not want to be part of a liturgical practice that invites them to see themselves as part of something larger than themselves. They do not want to be challenged to live their lives with respect and dignity for all of creation. They just want some vague connection with the “spirit” that provides some vague benefit to their lives.

The allegory continues: “The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces, and it will crush anyone on whom it falls.” Anyone who turns away from Jesus will forfeit the abundant and eternal life God has in store for us. We see the effects of greed and violence all around us. People have ruined their own lives and nearly destroyed the global economy because they focused on themselves as the center of the universe. They turned to the stone the builders rejected and that stone all but broke the entire nation. Once they have been broken down, they have the opportunity to be built up again on a firm foundation.

This allegorical parable of Jesus in reality does not end on a cross the final word is one of hope and redeeming love sealed in the resurrection of Jesus. The teaching here is that evil does not have the final answer. Violence driving out violence with greater violence is not the solution to our greedy desires.

Resurrection is not retaliation but God’s answer - as Paul writes in Romans: “God proves God’s love for us in that while we are still sinners Christ died for us.”

Marcus Borg writes about visiting the church in Assisi built to honor St. Francis. After touring the church Borg wrote: “although it was a masterpiece of architecture filled with some of the world’s greatest art, Francis would not have wanted such wealth spent honoring him. He would have said, “It’s not about me.” But building a Basilica was not a mistake because it reminds us of Francis and the fact that Francis pointed beyond himself to God.”

The same thought applies to us today. The church reminds us “it is not about us as individuals or us as a group,” it is about God’s mercy and justice for all people. As God’s disciples today we must press on bringing hope and grace to the world as we proclaim God’s kingdom on this earth as it is in heaven. Amen