

Matthew 21:33-46

Producing Fruit

Violence begets violence, and this parable of the landowner and the tenants in the vineyard appears violent from beginning to end. This is one of those pieces of scripture I would rather avoid than preach on. It makes me cringe. How can this story represent anything that is about the loving God that I prefer to speak about? Yet here it is. One of the stories that Jesus tells in order to teach people then and now about the kingdom of God.

Once again, as with most scripture, the location, the audience, and the circumstances are of importance to understanding what we are reading and hearing. Each Sunday we read a portion of scripture, but if we were to read this in context, we would know that Jesus is in the temple in Jerusalem and he is teaching.

Just the day before he had arrived in Jerusalem in a triumphal parade we know as Palm Sunday. He proceeded to cleanse the temple by driving out "all who were selling and buying in the temple and he overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves." (Matthew 21:12). He leaves overnight and how the next day is back in the temple.

This story comes in the middle of three such stories, and all cut to the chase about Jesus' authority, which the chief priests and elders of the people were challenging. He was there teaching, but certainly not with their authority or permission. But challenging Jesus in public was dangerous. They couldn't stir up the crowd and create a riot, but they were not going to stand idly by as this man led people in ways that threatened the leaders' power and authority.

So, they have asked Jesus, "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?" (Matthew 21:23). Jesus follows up with the parable of the two sons, which we discussed last week, then this one about the parable of the wicked tenants and next week is the parable of the wedding banquet. Again, if we were reading this as a book, and not in a section each week, it would be easier to see the connections. This story is part of a larger narrative.

With all that in mind, we turn to this particular parable. Remember, though others were in ear shot, Jesus was speaking to rulers, to power and authority. This was not the everyday Jewish man or woman. These were people with power and privilege, tasked with leading people to God, and it would seem that things have gotten messed up. Rather than leading, loving, compassion and care...greed, prestige, and the love of power have taken hold among the leaders of the people. Sound familiar?

When reading this parable, one might come to think of the landowner as God, the tenants as the Jewish people, and slaves that were sent to collect the harvest as the prophets. Finally, the son as Jesus. That would be reasonable, but read without nuance it comes off as God being a violent God who judges harshly. And it has been interpreted at times in history and even today with little grace. But as has been said by theologian Frederick Buechner, “The one who judges us most finally will be the one who loves us most fully.”¹

Jesus was speaking against power and authority that was unjust, unfair, and in this case, rulers who cared more about their position than the well-being of the lost people of Israel who needed compassion, protection, and to know God present in their lives. Their lives revealed that they had ignored the authority of God. This story is about how we treat God and what we think of the God we serve.

This is bad behaviour called out big time. And even while Jesus is speaking, telling this story, the words of judgement are put on the lips of the rulers when he asks them. “Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?’ 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.’” (v40-41)

They have judged themselves and in that moment they “realized that he was speaking about them.” Of course, “They wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowds, because they regarded [Jesus] as a prophet.” (v48) They did not fear God, or God’s judgement on them. They were too inwardly focused to see outside of their own possible loss of power and authority. But God is focused on people and their needs. God’s focus is love and when love is not our response to others, that is what God judges.

I mean, the cross was all about love. God’s love for humankind. God took the ultimate moment of violence against his Son Jesus and turned it into grace, hope, compassion, and love outpoured. God did not retaliate, but said I love you this much that even though this act of violence was perpetrated against me, against Jesus, I will bring life from it.

What this parable does for us then is to say, look at yourself, take a look at this congregation, take a look at the one you have called to lead this congregation. Are we people who want safety, power, prestige? Do we like the status quo and so are unwilling to show the compassion and grace toward others that God requires of us? If that is the case, it says a lot about our relationship or lack there of with God.

Is our building more important than the people who gather in it or around it? Are we hoarding our time, talent, energy, and resources for our own good, or are we looking outward to the people who are lost, afraid, alone, hungry, cold, tired, and hurting?

These are difficult questions and we may not like the answers. How do we treat God? Are we ignoring the authority of God in our lives and in the church?

¹ Copenhaver Martin B. *Feasting on the Word: Year A Volume 4 Season after Pentecost 2*. Editors David L. Bartlett, and Barbara Brown Taylor. Westminster John Knox Press. Louisville. 2010. P142.

Being part of the kingdom of God is about what fruits we produce. What good have we brought into the world through our love and action? There are a lot of question here, but worthy of our time to ponder. Is God ruler of our lives or just a figure head of the church? Do we prefer to make decisions for God or are we really listening to know the will of God for our lives?

I will say that I am very proud of this congregation. I am grateful for each congregation I am working with right now, because each is asking these questions. We are not going to get it all right. We are going to stumble and make mistakes together and as individuals. We cannot ignore the difficult questions and their answers that will speak volumes about us, yet, there is hope. The God who judges also looks with compassion on us because of God's great love that was made flesh in the life and death of Jesus who now lives and reigns with God and the Holy Spirit.

In the words from Micah 6:8, Do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God. If we do this, if we live with this intent, surely we will produce the fruits of the kingdom here on earth in ways that will, by word and action, bring hope to the hopeless, love to the lonely, and joy to those mourn. May we be known as those, as a church, whose love breaks barriers, responds and restores those captive in body, mind and spirit, and celebrates with rejoicing all that God has done now and always, in love and powerful witness to God's love for all. Amen.