

## A Parable of Patterns

*Matthew 21: 33-46*

"Listen to another parable. There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a wine press in it, and built a watchtower. Then he leased it to tenants and went to another country. When the harvest time had come, he sent his servants to the tenants to collect his produce. But the tenants seized his servants and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. Again he sent other servants, more than the first; and they treated them in the same way. Finally he sent his son to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.' But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, 'This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance.' So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him. 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." 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'? Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom. The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls." When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they realized that he was speaking about them. They wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowds, because they regarded him as a prophet.

Set the context. Jesus has just ridden the Palm Sunday donkey into Jerusalem fulfilling a prophecy about King David's heir. Jesus enters the temple and tosses tables. He gets questioned by Chief Priests about his authority, which is normal. Their job is to sift through who the wanna-be messiahs are to figure out who the promised heir really is. Then Jesus launches into a series of parables including this one. All in the context of who the true promised heir is and what the heir is supposed to do.

As we begin we admit, the parable is simple enough. It is horribly violent but it is full of historical memory. The images of a vineyard and tenants and watchtowers are stolen straight out of Isaiah. According to Isaiah, the vineyard—who is Israel—has been entrusted to tenants—Israel's leaders—who build a watchtower in the midst of the fields—i.e. the temple. Except, when the owner comes back to see how the harvest is going, the grapes are wild and sour. Israel hasn't been doing its job of being who God has called them to be. So Isaiah ends with the destruction of the vineyard and ends with, "God expected justice, but saw bloodshed; righteousness, but heard a cry."

So Jesus takes the opportunity to draw some parallels for the temple priests—the current authority figures—by telling a poignant parable about Israel's historical failures. About how the owner has sent many servants—i.e. the prophets—to turn them away from bloodshed toward justice. But the tenants abuse the prophets who tell them hard truths they are not wanting to hear. Again and again the cycle of violence stands in the center of their story. Until the owner sends his son thinking it will be different—who does that? And what happens to him? They take him

outside the vineyard—as to not stain the soil so the fruit can remain kosher—and they do the same thing to him. Jesus is retelling their violent historical pattern through a parable where there is little room left for the imagination.

Well, how do we hear the parable? After all, we have a history too, don't we. Our land stained with the same violent refrains. Tomorrow is indigenous people's day—traditional called Christopher Columbus Day. The Native people offered to share their land, but it wasn't enough for our manifest destiny. So we stole it, displaced some tribes, erased others. All while spreading myths about *their savagery*. You can crack open the book, *A People's History of the United States* if you want to learn more. Then there is African American history. Where we learn about slavery, and prophets like Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, David Walker kept speaking truth into the hypocrisy of a nation claiming to be under God.

Then there was Dr. King and Malcom X and Angela Davis. LGBTQ rights with Harvey Milk, James Baldwin, Audre Lorde. All prophets who were beaten, jailed, murdered. Their activism mythicized as dangers to society. Their books banned. We see how the parable Jesus tells isn't only an account of Israel's history, but of ours as well. When God sends prophets to help us reimagine a just society, we did the same thing to them in the name of religion—again and again and again.

But here's the critical piece. Jesus ends the parable with a question: "After they kill the son. When the owner comes back to the vineyard, what will the owner do to those wicked tenants?" What is the reckoning moment going to look like? And what do the chief priests say? They say, "The owner will put those wretches to a miserable death. And then the owner will give the responsibility to those who will tend to the vineyard faithfully." Remember who the owner is? Of course, it is God. And so what version of God do they subscribe to? It is a punishing God. A God of retributive justice! It's the version of God some of us grew up with, unfortunately. A God who loves the sinner but hates the sin. A God who says you belong only if you fit into these claustrophobic categories. A God whose answer to violence is more violence. If our version of God is as vengeful and as phobic as we are—and condemns all the same people we want to—then we probably need to recheck the god we are following. Jesus asks them a crucial question at the end of the parable. And it sets them up.

Except what does Jesus say? "Haven't you read your bibles!" God isn't about retribution; God is about restoration. The cornerstone that is rejected—the true heir—opens up a new way that holds all things together through forgiveness and compassion. Because the fruit of justice will always, always end up sour if not grown in the soil of love, compassion and forgiveness.

Jesus says to the chief priests, "I know you believe yourselves to be the faithful ones who can responsibly tend to the vineyard. But if you follow a God who exercises force rather than forgiveness, who reacts with violence rather than vibrant love, then you probably don't have the imagination for what God's kingdom is about. Because the God we follow determines the people we become. And the people we become determines the fruit that grows in the vineyard.

A colleague once volunteered at a soup kitchen for homeless people. There was a transwoman there who he saw eating alone, so he went and asked, "Can I sit with you for dinner." She said, "Sure." And as they got talking, she asked him what he did for a living. He said, "Actually, I'm a pastor." The woman said, "Ohh," and got quiet. But then she said, "I grew up very religious, but after I came out, the church turned their backs on me. So, no offense, but I'm not very religious anymore." My colleague said, "It's understandable why you aren't religious. Too many churches are following the wrong god! And even though religion isn't your thing, I just hope that you know that you are a beloved child of God. And if we claim God is a king, do you know what that makes you?" "What?" she asked. "It makes you a princess!"

The one who is rejected becomes the cornerstone—the true heir—who opens up a way which shows us we are all heirs of God's kingdom. No more violence. Only vibrant life for everyone. And then we get to work the soil of a new history together. Where the fruit growing in our vineyard is sweet, and affirming, and full of joy and restorative justice. This is what Jesus says God is doing for us and through us and even in spite of us. And truly, is it not amazing in our eyes?