

Stubbing Your Toe on the Cornerstone

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Matthew 21: 33-46

Well, first of all this parable in Matthew is not an allegory. It's not a symbolic story about God and Jesus. So, hard as it is for us, right now try to get that out of your head. This parable is not actually a story about the history of God and Israel. It's not about how God keeps sending his prophets to Israel and they keep mistreating them, and finally God sends his Son and they kill him. Because, if you read the story closely, it doesn't make sense that way. First of all, nowhere in the Bible is God thought of as being an absentee landlord. That's some kind of Deist notion. In the Bible God is present...always close at hand. Secondly, who would think that by killing God's Son, they would then get his inheritance? Nowhere in the the New Testament, or in the Christian tradition is that presented as the reasoning for why we crucify Jesus.

Rather, unlike the parable where this son is immediately recognized as the landowner's son, the New Testament says time and time again we have *trouble* recognizing God's Son as such. "He came to his own and his own didn't know him." The problem begins in the fact that we *don't* recognize this One among us as God's son. And finally, the news of the Resurrection is that God does *not* come back to *get* those who betrayed and killed his Son. God comes back in mercy and forgiveness. God does not come back to take away. The resurrection says God finds a way around even our crucifixion of Jesus to keep on giving. So, the parable doesn't make sense read that way.

It's not really about God and Jesus. It's *really* about an absentee landlord and the tenants who live on and work the land. And like most all of Jesus' parables, it's really about us. There is a larger story that we probably need to hear to really understand this parable. And that story is this. There was a huge split in Jesus' society between the haves and the have-nots. On the one hand, you had the upper class which included all the Roman overlords, and their appointed Jewish political and religious figures. These included people like Herod and his family and it included the chief priests and the Sadducees and elders of the Temple. All these were the wealthy landowners. And on the other hand you had basically everyone else. The majority of these were peasant farmers, tenants and laborers. And then scattered among this class were other peasants who may or may not have been a little bit better off...craftsmen, fishermen, a few small shop owners.

That's the larger story into which Jesus tells this parable...two classes, haves and have-nots. See, this landowner is rich! He's so filthy rich he doesn't even live on this land. It's just one of his many assets. Who knows how many homes he has? He might not even know. At any rate, he's rich and on this particular land he's planted a vineyard, and dug a wine press in it, but not only that, he's put a fence around it all and built a watchtower. Now, what does that tell you? It tells me he's serious about making and keeping his money, and he wants to make sure nobody else gets their hands on any of his assets, so he's not cheated of anything that's his. A fence and a watchtower. See, he's a Wall St. CEO and that fence and watchtower are the golden parachute clauses he has written into the contract. And here's the deal, what does this landowner really care about the land, or about the people who work it? They're just money in the bank to him. If he deeply cared about any of it... about taking care of the land, about the quality of the wine it could produce, about the hard-working people tending to all of that, he'd be there with them. I dare say, he'd live there. But, at least he'd be close by and would often be there. But no, he's living in another country! He's off in his mansion on Santorini or Crete , or some other Mediterranean island. You get the idea.

When you know the larger story, you know that Jesus is speaking about all the unrest among the peasants. You know that in this parable, the tenants have reached the point where they've had enough. They've had enough and they're starting to take matters into their own hands. So,

when this landowner sends his servants to collect his profits, the tenants have been brooding on this for awhile and they're thinking, you know more of this ought to be ours. We're the ones who've invested our time and our sweat and our blood here. And so, they jump the landlord's slaves and they beat them and stone them and kill them. And so, then the landlord sends other slaves, more this time, and the tenants do the same thing to them. And then finally, you remember, the landlord sends his son, thinking to himself, "they'll have to *respect* him." But, the landlord doesn't really get the way the tenants are thinking. He doesn't get it.

See, all along they are focused on getting what they think really ought to be theirs in the first place. And so, when they see the son coming, they assume that the landlord has died, and the son has come to inspect his inheritance. And they know this is the only heir, and so they think this is our chance, we kill him and this land is ours. See, with no heirs the land would go to those who live on it. And so, they seize him and throw him out of the vineyard and kill him. Well, it's not behavior that can be condoned. But, maybe after the last couple of weeks in our own economic crisis, at some level we can understand it, can't we?

This past week we had the strange bedfellows of the most liberal democrats and the most conservative republicans banding together to defeat the package to rescue the economy. They of course had and stated different reasons for voting against it. But, in both cases they were playing to our anger and self interest at thinking about the prospect of Wall St. or corporate CEOs walking away from the debacle with millions while our own pension savings are in a tailspin. The thing is, just like in Jesus' parable, there's enough blame to go around. But, the thing that Jesus would show us in this parable is that there is a larger underlying spiritual issue at stake. And that is the selfishness and violence in *our* hearts. How do we come to see and to be willing to live in the reality that we are *all* in this together?

How do we let go of our selfishness and the violent urges that are born of our anger at the prospect of losing what we think is rightfully ours? You see, we can understand where those tenants in the parable were coming from. And at the same time, there's part of us that is on the side of the landowner. But, Jesus recognizes that the real problem is the same for both groups. And so, here's the genius of what he does here. He has the chief priests and the elders, wealthy landowners themselves, finish the parable. You remember? He finishes by asking them the question, "when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?" And they reply: "He will put those wretches to a miserable death..." and so, speaking for the landowner class, they reveal themselves to be just as violent as the tenants in the parable.

And Jesus says to them, "The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone..." He says to them, "the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom." Friends, that's the good news. Although, it can be hard news for us, it's good news. Jesus comes that we might stub our toe on the cornerstone that reveals our selfish and violent hearts. How else will we truly produce the fruits of the kingdom than by modeling the One who embodied those first fruits and who showed us and taught us what they are? Being humble and on the same ground with others. Mourning with those who hurt. Showing mercy. Having an eye for God in creation and in each person. Making peace. Loving enemies. Being willing to lose our lives for Christ's sake, for others' sake.

To get there, Jesus knew we need to stub our toe on him from time to time and face up to the selfishness and violence in our hearts to where we keep saying, whether Wall St. CEO or Joe Smith saving for retirement: "I'm going to get mine, to hell with the rest of you." This meal speaks to us of a different way, doesn't it? It speaks to us of the One on whom we stub our toe as being the same One who allowed himself to be broken for us. So, even stubbing our toe on him is grace and healing. This meal speaks to us of our being willing to be broken for each other. This meal draws us all together to remind us that we are one family, God's children. Wall St. CEO and Main St. factory worker, black and white, republican and democrat, gay and

straight, old and young. We're all in this together. And it all *belongs* to God, not us. It's all God's gift to be shared. It's Christ's body given for us. Will you come? God gives himself to you here as she does every day.

Amen.