

Of what are we afraid?

Matt 21:33-46

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St. Mary the Virgin

Matt 21 Jesus said, "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 slaves to the tenants to collect his produce. But the tenants seized his slaves and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. Again he sent other slaves, 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.

Today we have Jesus using another shocking parable. I don't think Jesus is supporting violence but he is using a story known to his audience and twisting it to reach what was for them a challenging conclusion. He got their attention and then shocked them.

His audience heard the beginning of the parable, and were cheering. Anything done to absentee landowners sounded good to them. They supported any rebellion against the absentee landowners, and they were assuming that Jesus, known to be a radical, was joining them in this rebellion. But he turns the story inside out, and they are appalled. Parables exist to startle, confront, and amaze people. They do not exist to comfort. They exist to make people who are self-assured less assured. The people who heard this parable believed that they were the subjugated people. Instead Jesus sides with the landowner and rejects the tenants. What did Jesus mean?

To throw light on the parable, assume that we are all tenants in the Land. The question is, who, for Galilee, is the distant owner? Is it Rome or God in Heaven? The answer to that question sets up the conflict.

The parable sets up the powers that be in the Holy Land as concerned that their power is threatened by this pretender announcing that he is the Son of God. It is the feeling of being threatened, the life in fear, that I want to focus on today. The authorities in Jerusalem are not looking for Jesus to liberate them from anything. They led comfortable lives and had accommodated themselves to Roman Rule. Jesus wasn't preaching sedition but they feared that he was. They were afraid. As we read on in Matthew we know that they respond to this fear by crucifying Jesus. This is a violent parable and it provoked a violent response. Those who heard it knew it was critical of them and they didn't like it. After all they had laws, procedures, position and stability. They feared change.

They had good reason to be afraid, but not of Jesus. Assuming for the moment that Jesus told the story in about 30 C.E.¹, the Romans would end Judaism as they knew it in 70 C.E., 40 years later, with the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem². The ending had nothing to do with the Jesus movement. It had to do with Roman power. The authorities were afraid of the wrong thing.

We live in interesting times. What does this text have to do with our interesting times?

Christian Nationalists live in fear. They comfortable life they imagine they have lived since WW II is threatened and they perceive the threat as coming from people of color, women, and immigrants. They want people of color to remember their place. They want women to stay at home. They want immigrants to stay in their countries of origin. This doesn't mean simply undocumented immigrants but all immigrants. They want to turn the clock back to *Father Knows Best* or *Leave It to Beaver* or *The Andy Griffith Show* or *My Three Sons* or *Ozzie and Harriet*, or *I Dream of Jeannie* or any number of sitcoms from my childhood.

Men had their place and enjoyed acknowledged supremacy. Women had wisdom and the good sense to stay at home. People of Color, if they appeared at all, were servants or wise but powerless observers. White men ruled.

This was an imaginary time. It never really existed as euphoric memory says it did. The seeds of its destruction were apparent to those who studied the time like, for instance, Robert Bellah who compiled the seminal study, Habits of the Heart and later The Good Society. His work shows that in the 60s, the family was breaking down, leading in the 80s to homelessness. In the 60s religion was becoming less relevant to the poor, particularly in the South. Today religion appeals mostly to college educated relatively affluent people. In the 60s women chaffed at the patriarchy. This was the time when Martin Luther King called for this country to live up to its dreams. The Vietnam War showed that we believed that violence was necessary to preserve the peace.

We cannot control, any more than the tenants could, the pace of change, especially change which has freed so many from so much bondage. In consequence some react violently.

Many today long for that fantastically remembered time even if they never experienced it and live in fear in the uncertainty our society faces today. So, we arm ourselves. We legislate sexual morality. We attempt to end the epidemic of addiction by arresting people. We appeal to violence in a mistaken sense of worshiping the Prince of

¹ Common Era not A.D. We do not live in anything that could be described as the Year of Our Lord.

² The Jewish state would not reform in any recognizable fashion until 1948 C.E.

Peace. We blame the unhoused for being homeless. We take no responsibility for the turmoil in Latin America that our policies contributed to and we wish the Roosevelt Hotel would simply empty out.

What does the Gospel have to say and what would preaching the Gospel in this environment say to us? Does the Gospel have a clear position on the tragedies we face?

In the Gospel this morning, look at the violence. The landowner sends his slaves to collect his rent. They are killed. He sends three, one is beaten, one is killed we know not how and the third is stoned to death. It's a violent story. It's in the bible. So this patient man sends more slaves and they are treated the same way. So this patient man sends his son believing that the tenants will respect his son and heir. They killed him. The landowner's patience is exhausted and we read that he executes the tenants and turns the vineyard over to new tenants. Again violence.

It is clear in my reading that the tenants believed that they were entitled to the produce of the vineyard and the owner was not deserving. Obviously he disagreed and Jesus comes down on his side. When the representatives of the owner come to collect what is his, the tenants are at least annoyed, perhaps threatened, and certainly noncompliant. They are after all special. They deserve what they have. They take action and are apparently surprised that they cannot do so with impunity. They are only defending what is theirs or should be theirs.

The arguments around our leading today such fearful lives, and our pandering to politicians who promise to protect us from what we fear by using force, are similar to those of the tenants. Of what are we afraid?

We read in the bible that we are loved by God and that nothing we can do will separate us from that love. We hear on Sundays that there is nothing more important to our being than being loved by God and that if we are loved by God we can face any challenge. Clearly we, at least as a people, don't believe that. Of what are we afraid?

Imagine the life of the new tenants in the vineyard. We can imagine they have the opportunity to be productive and live meaningful lives. The only thing which can destroy those meaningful lives is fear. We are here, in this church, to learn how to live without fear. Bad and horrible things do and will continue to happen. The invasion of Israel by Hamas, the constant loss of innocent life in Ukraine, the many wars going on today in Africa, the nuclear developments in North Korea, and on and on can convince us that we are smart to be afraid. There is much to fear. Yet we are here today celebrating the belief that we are loved, that all of creation is loved and that meaningful, hopeful life awaits all. Love casts out fear. Why can't we love? How can we be the new tenants?

The authorities in Jerusalem feared the message that the Prince of Peace preached. He was crucified. We believe that the Easter event was a victory over evil, the devil and all fear. Jesus claims in this parable, at least as it is situated in Matthew, to be the Son of God. This struck fear in the hearts of those who had something to lose if he was right. They react with violence. They were of course wrong. It was the Romans they pandered to whom they should've feared.

We have to dare to live as if we are loved no matter what evil tells us. If perfect love casts out fear then being afraid makes it difficult, if not impossible, for us to recognize the love. We are called to be absurd and dare to love so that we see this violent world as peopled by people for whom Christ died and love all of them and fear none. Fear, even when rational, can never be a Christian response. The only faithful response is Love and Love isn't armed.