

Have you heard the story? Have you heard the story about the vineyard? About the “wicked tenants?” Jesus told it one day while teaching in the temple. Like so many of his stories, his parables, we’re not entirely sure what to make of it. It seems like a pretty simple story, but it also seems to carry echoes of truth from long ago. It’s a living story, you could say.

And as this parable has lived in the minds of its many readers and hearers, we have, throughout the ages, tried to pin it down and wrangle some sort of meaning out of it. For the longest time, we’ve used the tool of allegory as our primary weapon in subduing this and many other parables. In case it’s been a long time since you were in ninth grade English class (for some of us longer than others) let me remind you that allegory is a style of literature in which symbols serve as exact, point-by-point, representations of other things. Sometimes allegory is used in scripture. Think of Jesus saying, “I am the vine, you are the branches.” Well, we know that Jesus wasn’t literally a vine, but this allegory helps us to see how we individual believers, who are scattered around the world, are still united by our one Lord, Jesus, just as the one vine connects its many off-shooting branches. So too has the tool of allegory been used to try to make sense of these confusing parables that Jesus spoke, and it has especially been used to interpret this parable of the vineyard. Here’s how it usually goes:

A rich man (God) plants a vineyard (the people of Israel). He builds various instruments like fences and wine presses (the laws of the Torah) and then gives the responsibility to manage this vineyard to tenant farmers (the religious and political leaders of Jewish people). They fail to give the rich man the harvest from their labor (religious devotion) so the rich man (God) sends his slaves (the prophets of the Old Testament) to collect what is due. These slaves (prophets) are beaten and killed, and so the rich man (God) sends his son (Jesus) to collect. The tenant farmers seize him (the Garden of Gethsemane) throw him out of the vineyard (Golgotha outside of Jerusalem) and kill him (the Crucifixion). Because of this trespass the rich man (God) will come and destroy the tenant farmers (the punishment of Israel) and give the land to new tenants (us Gentile Christians) who will produce and return the harvest.ⁱ

It all makes sense doesn’t it—crystal clear and point by point. There’s no need to keep studying the parable because we’ve gotten the meaning out of it. We’ve learned all there is to be learned. Well, maybe. Or maybe not? Maybe there are some places where this crystal clear allegorical interpretation seems to fall apart. For instance, many people have wondered about the description of the rich man planting a new vineyard and building new construction on it. In the time of Jesus this would have been a typical phenomenon happening regularly throughout the countryside. The way it worked was that poor farmers would have to borrow money to make up for a bad crop season. And when another bad year rolled around, they couldn’t pay back their debt so the lenders would collect on their collateral instead, the little bit of farm land that they owned. Then, they would kick these poor farmers off the land that they owned, and after enough adjoining pieces of property were acquired the previous farmers would be invited back to serve as share croppers, on new larger plantation estates like this new vineyard in the story.ⁱⁱ Sounds a lot like the actions of “The Bank” in John Steinbeck’s Depression era novel, *The Grapes of Wrath* (another interesting vineyard reference). It doesn’t sit too well to quickly label as “God” the character in the story who is profiting from the economic victimization of poor farmers.

Or what about when the rich man keeps demanding his payment and carelessly sending more and more innocent slaves to their death in order to carry out his demands. Didn’t we hear in another parable, just last week, something about God being a God of infinite mercy, a God who graciously forgives debts and calls us to forgive our debtors? No, there’s something about this rich man in the story that doesn’t seem like the God we read about in scripture.

And what about the son who is sent to collect? Well, there certainly seem to be some points that make him appear a good deal like Jesus, but the most obvious disconnect for us as Christians comes in examining the death of this son. According to the story, the son is seized, taken outside the vineyard and

killed. That’s it. End of story for him. The death of this son does not accomplish anything in the parable...all it does is serve as a plot device to anger his rich father even more. Nothing changes when this son dies. Certainly we as Christian could take issue with identifying this son from the story as Jesus Christ, the one who’s death and resurrection *did* change everything. The importance of the cross, and the salvation of the world brought about by Christ’s crucifixion and resurrection are the essential themes of all Christian worship, discipleship, and theology. We ought to be very weary indeed of any attempt to tell the story of our faith that does not put Good Friday and Easter Sunday in the forefront. Thus, the strongest argument against an allegorical interpretation of the parable comes when the most important characters in the story are examined. So, what then are we to do with this story? Well maybe, maybe there are *other* ways to hear this parable? Maybe there are other ways to let this living story act upon us, as Jesus intended it to do.

Now before we proceed let me clarify something. I’m not saying that everyone who has or does read the parables in an allegorical way is wrong or simple-minded. If you attended the Adult Sunday School class in the Fellowship Hall this morning lead by Marvin Quattlebaum, Jr. you heard an insightful and critical examination of the parable that began with this allegorical approach. Many good and faithful Christians throughout the ages have read the parables through this lens. But like a great song or poem that moves us in different ways throughout our lifetime, there may be other ways of hearing Jesus’ parable.

What if...what if Jesus told this story about the “wicked tenants” and the “wicked landowner” fighting and killing over the vineyard to make a point to his audience? What if Jesus told the parable in order to provide us with a glimpse, a snapshot, a caricature, of what the world looks like under the rule of violence and bloodshed. What if the story is told to give us insight into the ways that our participation in the hostility of the world around us only leads to more and more atrocities—self-perpetuating cycles of violence. Remember, first the landowner uses the leverage of debts to economically oppress the poor farmers/tenants. Then, these victims respond with violence themselves that increases throughout the story: first they assault, then they kill, and then they stone to death the slaves (other victims) of the landowner. Then, in an act of extreme disrespect and shame they kill the man’s son and leave his body lying as garbage for the dogs outside of the vineyard. The final word in this story of violence is the retribution of the landowner. The foreshadowed Massacre at the Vineyard, where death is met with even more death. And then the cycle will begin again with a new set of poor tenants to oppress. “This is the way of the world,” Jesus seems to be saying. Kill or be killed is the ethic of the Roman Empire. And living under military occupation of the Romans, Jesus’ contemporaries in Israel knew all too well what it felt like to live under the rule of the sword. In fact, his audience knows *so well* the way that cycles of violence always go that they can even finish the story for him. Jesus asks, “Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?” And the chief priests and the Pharisees jump to answer, ‘He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and lease the vineyard to other tenants...’” They know the answer. They’ve seen this scenario play out hundreds of times before their very eyes.

Well, maybe. But what if...what if theirs’ was not the only way to answer Jesus’ question? What if there are other possibilities? Should we be so quick, so certain to join the Pharisees and jump to the conclusion that violence is the *only* possible response to violence?

Jesus taught, “You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile.” (Matthew 5: 38-41). You have heard that it was said, “An eye for an eye.” You have seen the way the world works, where bloodshed is met with more bloodshed.

But I say to you, ‘You are called to be different for you are not of this world! You are not of the Roman Empire, you are of Empire of God. You are not under the rule of the sword, you are under the rule of the Peace of God, which surpasses all understanding.’”

What if the audience had not been so quick to answer Jesus’ question, “How will the owner deal with the tenants?” What if they had lingered in silence for a bit and remembered their own sacred stories. What if they had remembered that in the beginning God peacefully spoke creation into being and blessed it and called it good...unlike the teachings of those religions of the great and powerful empires. The Assyrians, the Babylonians, and Romans all had their creation stories too, but for all of them the world was made as a result of a divine violent attack of warrior gods. There was the slaying of evil powers in cosmic warfare and the corpses of the defeated became the world, usually with the rivers and seas forming from the blood of the defeated.ⁱⁱⁱ But against these violent stories of creation, the Hebrews taught that there was one living, loving God who graciously spoke creation into being, and it was good.

What if Jesus’ audience had not been so quick to jump to the conclusion of wrath and had instead remembered their own prophecies and hopes for the coming of the Messiah, the one about whom Isaiah spoke saying,

“The wolf shall live with the lamb,
the leopard shall lie down with the kid,
the calf and the lion and the fatling together,
and a little child shall lead them.
The cow and the bear shall graze,
their young shall lie down together;
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.
The nursing child shall play over the hole of the [viper],
and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder’s den.

They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain;
for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.” (Isaiah 11:6-)

What if aggression, hostility, cruelty and carnage do not truly get to have the final word? What if there was another way to answer Jesus’ question illumined by the peace of God, which as Paul says “surpasses all understanding”—that is, it surpasses all understanding of the world that are based on the “Myth of Redemptive Violence.” What if the murder of the son actually accomplishes something...something no one ever expected? What if the death of the son actually ushers in the reign of God’s peace? The tenants thought that they had seen the end of this son, they thought they had left his desecrated body outside the vineyard. But what if, “The stone that the builders rejected has become the very cornerstone;” What if the dishonorable death of the son was only the beginning. What if “on the third day he rose again from the dead in accordance with the scriptures.”^{iv} What if the death and resurrection of the son become the foundation, the cornerstone for the Father’s response. Jesus quotes psalm 118 to them when he says, “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.” What if the final word of judgment comes from the God who raised Jesus from the dead as the firstborn of a new creation, a new creation ruled by the love and peace of God, not by the power of the sword. What if the end of the story is told with the hope of the peace of God which surpasses all understand?

Friends, as Christians we know the end of the story—the True End of the True Story. We know that the Son did not die in vain. We know that after he was raised from the dead he appeared to his disciples and said, “*Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.*” (John 20: 21). We know that the God who makes covenants is the God who keeps covenants, despite our turning away in

sin. We know the good news of the gospel, that the grace of God, not the wrath of humanity, has the final word in the stories of our lives and in the story of God’s love for God’s people. And in response to this good news we are called to be servants of God’s peace,^v showing love to our neighbors and our enemies alike.

To God be all glory and honor now and forever more. Amen.

ⁱ John Calvin, *Commentary on Harmony of the Evangelists—Vol. III*, 28-32.

ⁱⁱ Luise Schottroff, *The Parables of Jesus*, 15-16

ⁱⁱⁱ *Enuma Elish*

^{iv} The Nicene Creed, *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church, USA Part I: The Book of Confession*, 1.2

^v “Lord, Make Us Servants of Your Peace,” PC(USA) Hymnal, Hymn # 374.