

19 Pentecost

Proper 22

October 8, 2023

Layers upon layers upon layers. Jesus's parables always have at least two layers, one about everyday life (a layer in which something is often quite startling), and what the parable suggests about who God is, what God is up to, and what our part in it is and/or should be. Challenging enough. As all parables are intended to be.

But today's parable, about the tenants in a vineyard, their landlord and his slaves, and what the tenants do has many more layers than that.

There's the real-life story: tenants who have been working someone else's vineyard refuse to pay the rent they owe to the landlord, who owns the vineyard. The tenants refuse violently: they attack the slaves who have come to collect, gravely injury one and killing another. So the landlord sends more slaves—not an army, not local officials, note—and they are met with the same violent response. Finally, the landlord sends the son, his heir. Him the tenants kill, thinking that then the landlord will leave them alone.

But, Jesus asks, what is the landlord more likely to do? The answer is clear: some kind of commensurate judgement, probably quite a harsh one. The tenants have broken their contract by refusing to pay what they owe; they've engaged in violence which escalates over time and culminates in murder; and one of their victims is the landlord's son and heir. Regardless of what you think of capital punishment, it's pretty clear what is likely to happen to the tenants.

So what's all that about, in addition to the story? We might conclude, understandably, that the landlord is God, the tenants are God's people, and the son they kill is Jesus, and so the tenants will, at best, be cast out of the vineyard at least, and rightly so. And for many ages, this has been how this parable has been taken, to the great persecution, murder, and destruction of those who claimed to be God's people—the Jews. A tragic and horrifying interpretation with a long history of murderous effects.

Some of this understanding is funded by the fact that in the book of Isaiah, there is the great parable of the vineyard, where the owner finds the tenants have not done their jobs, and so will break down the vineyard hedges and let it be trampled and destroyed—another layer, and one well known to Jesus's hearers.

What's Isaiah talking about? On one level, he is prophesying to his own hearers that the people of God are at risk because of their own faults and failings, their own departure from God.

Perhaps. But people of Jesus's time also know that while Israel was invaded and conquered, God also stayed with the people, even in exile, and ultimately restored them to the land God had promised. In other words, the people of Jesus's time will hear this as a parable about judgment but more about restoration, mercy, and forgiveness. Maybe.

So it matters who Jesus tells the parable to—the scribes and Pharisees, the religious leaders and influencers of the people of Israel, occupied as it is by the Romans. Not only do the Scribes and Pharisees seem to demand the impossible: literal and figurative observance of all the laws and customs of Israel at the time, all of which carry economic costs most people cannot afford and still survive. Not only that, but the Scribes and the Pharisees in a variety of ways distract attention from the oppressive results of imperial occupation, thereby colluding with the Romans even if they don't actually support them.

So how does the parable sound now? It would seem that it is the *leaders* of the tenants who are under judgment, for their actions against the landlord, his slaves, and his heir. And it is not hard to imagine that things will not go well for them. Because as leaders, they have not only rebelled against the landlord, they've also put their own people in jeopardy.

Here's another layer: This is a story about an absentee landlord, demanding probably excessive payment for labor produce that has come from the unpaid labor of tenants who used to own the land, and from whom it has been taken by either force or coercion, or both. The tenants are defending what is theirs, and what they have put into it, from which they get little return, despite their great and effective labor.

So then the question of judgment and justice shifts at least a bit, doesn't it? When looked at from this point of view, more like the point of view of the tenants, perhaps the landlord and perhaps his slave are the focus of justice along with the tenants. And each group may deserve a different degree or kind of justice. But on this reading alone, who is the son, the heir?

SO: at the end of the parable, Jesus doesn't answer the question he poses: what will happen to those tenants. Instead, he changes the subject altogether. Finally, the focus is not on the vineyard, or the landlord, or the tenants, but on the son and heir—the one rejected. And THAT one becomes the basis, the foundation, the cornerstone of a whole new story set somewhere else. Isaiah is in the background here again: the one who is rejected will become the cornerstone, a reference to one of the Servant Songs which we Christians generally take to be about Jesus, but which the people of Jesus's time, at least, heard as about God's people as a whole: the people suffer, as shown by what happens to this exemplary figure, AND God restores them and blesses them.

And, we Christians understand that not only is Jesus persecuted and killed, he is raised to new life. And we, who follow him, from his first followers to now and into the future, are being raised to new life with him. Jesus is the cornerstone of new life in a new place—the Kingdom of God, where suffering is ended, wounds are healed, all are forgiven, all are restored, and creation reaches its culmination.

So yet another layer: who are we in this story? Or, better, how are we like each of the characters in this story, including the vineyard itself?

In what ways are we absent, demanding of others what we ourselves have not produced?
In what ways are we sent to do the will of those with authority over us, rightly or wrongly?

In what ways are we the healthy and productive vineyard, responding to the care and attention of others?

In what ways are we the tenants, giving our labor and efforts to something for which we receive some, but probably not enough, reward?

In what ways do we rebel, resort to violence, even murder to keep what we think should be ours?

In what ways are the son, the heir?

And in what ways are we built on that cornerstone?

Truth be told, I can see myself in each element of the story. Perhaps you do too. I can see myself, but I can also see the people of God today, here and around the world. I hope and I pray and I struggle to be less like the landlord and the murderous tenants. I hope and I pray and I struggle to be more like the vineyard and more like what the cornerstone upholds. I hope and I pray and struggle that we, here, elsewhere, the people of God do the same.

And I pray to a God of both justice and mercy, I throw myself on God's mercy in hope. Because I know what the landlord *and* the tenants have done to the vineyard, and to each other, and to the son. I know what we have done to those who are enslaved in so many ways, economically and politically yes, but also emotionally, physically, socially, and spiritually. I know that what we have sowed, the whole earth is now reaping, and it feels a lot like judgment—here and now.

I pray for God's mercy: on the world that God has made, on each and all of us, regardless of our places in this and other stories.

And I find hope in the stories of those who change the end of the story of the vineyard, in one way and another. I find hope in the memory of St. Francis of Assisi, whom we remember this week and today—and example not just of kindness to birds and bunnies, as he is so often portrayed, but of active mercy and companionship with a beleaguered creation, not all of which is cute and friendly. Companionship with the poor, companionship with the church in all its flaws and failings, and all because of his companionship with Jesus.

I find hope in all the saints, known and unknown, who have shown the light of the Gospel as an active testimony and embrace of God's good will for what God has made.

I find hope in those who live fruitful lives in the midst of despair, the poor, the rejected, the outcasts. I find hope in those who accompany and advocate for them.

I find hope in those social and political activities and actions that tend toward the well-being of all.

I find hope in those who respond to bad news and bad times by transformation and generosity.

But primarily and fundamentally and always, I find hope in the end of this parable: in the very fact of the cornerstone, and the fact that God builds on it, in part through us, regardless of how much we may be like landlord, tenants, or slaves. I place my confidence and trust in the cornerstone, the one whose judgment is always mercy, whatever else it might be. But always

mercy. For God has promised to restore the vineyard as well as build on the cornerstone. And all God's promises are true. For God is good, even when we are not.