

DE/MD Synod Sunday Worship
Pr. Tamika Jancewicz
Sunday, October 4, 2020

Matthew 21: 33-46

We meet Jesus in this continuous conversation with people who came to hear him, and religious leaders who came to challenge him. Jesus came to the temple grounds, occupying space with boldness and authority, and the religious leaders asked the question, “By what authority are you doing these things?” and in response, Jesus answers their question with a question, and then continues his conversation with parables to shed light not only to what authority he is doing these things, but to offer a chance for those willing to listen to turn around and change their perspective and see more clearly G-d’s ultimate authority in all of it. Last week, some of us heard the parable of two sons, one who walks the walk, and another whose words only went so far.

This week’s parable, however, takes the conversation to a whole another level. Jesus shifts the listeners back to what would have sounded familiar to those present, the words of the prophet Isaiah—our first reading for today. Here the words once more with the Common English Bible translation.

*¹Let me sing for my loved one
a love song for his vineyard.
My loved one had a vineyard on a fertile hillside.
² He dug it,
cleared away its stones,
planted it with excellent vines,
built a tower inside it,
and dug out a wine vat in it.
He expected it to grow good grapes—
but it grew rotten grapes. ¹*

But this time Jesus sets the parable up with a landowner and vineyard as he has done in the past. And this landowner puts just as much love and care into the vineyard as Isaiah proclaims about his loved one, the G-d of Israel, and, Jesus continues, the landowner leaves the vineyard to the care of the tenants.

To put this in context, tenants were put into place during occupied times, they were sharecroppers. They took care of the property that didn’t belong to them while those

¹ Isaiah 5:1-2, CEB

who owned it were busy ruling their territories. Tenants only had but so much control, and they were not always treated kindly. Again, Jesus sets the full picture for what he was about to reveal.

But what is most striking and what is hard to overlook in today's gospel is the amount of violence we hear about in this parable.

The tenants, it seems, have decided that this land belonged to them, and they would beat, stone, and kill anyone who came to collect what they assumed was theirs. Each time the landowner sent his slaves to collect what belonged *to him*, the tenants would become increasingly violent towards those who were in no position of authority other than to do what they were told. And so the landowner sent his son thinking *surely they would have respect for him*, but instead the violence took a turn towards greed and they not only killed the son, but tried to take even more than the land they unrightfully claimed as their own.

This parable is not like the parable of the workers in the vineyard. We're not talking about unjust wages and practices, Jesus uses a very traumatic and poignant story to bring the listeners in. Each person present would have been thinking of Roman occupation, and the violence they and their ancestors have witnessed time and time again. It was no mistake that Jesus quoted the prophet Isaiah intentionally to give the listeners a framework—based on their ancestral history of exile from their home.

Which is why when Jesus asked, "Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?" Their response was of judgement and with the same violent act of retaliation, "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."

We can almost hear the indignation in their voices, right? Surely those evil tenants deserve to be put to death for their violent ways.

We ourselves hear echoes of this sentiment in our times. We have our own history and our own present that informs us of the nature of violence in our world. This land wasn't empty with no one here when it was colonized. Our Indigenous siblings have been speaking out for hundreds of years about the injustice of losing not only their land, but also their livelihood, the lives of many of their people, and their ties to their cultural identities because colonizers came here to claim what did not belong to them.

And in our present time, how often do we hear of violence and death tolls rising? We hear talks of more law and more order to control the masses. We hear of crime infested cities and the need to militarize certain places to keep us all safe.

Also, in our present time, we can see videos of people violently being detained, which has sometimes ended in the death of our siblings, mostly black and brown. We can have debates over the sacredness of lives, and share in the violent depictions and stereotypes of different groups behind our computer screens. Many of us have become desensitized, even if we share a common fear of the unknown and of one another.

Their indignation is our own.

Jesus hears the answer of those present. The miserable death they impose on the tenants and lovingly reminds them of a psalm. A psalm that points every person back to the one who owns the land, the one who lovingly took their time to build the fence and the tower at the center, Jesus points them to the actions of G-d.

“The stone that the builders rejected became the cornerstone; and it is amazing in our eyes...”

In other words, what was meant for harm, what was violently rejected, what was seen as broken and useless, is the very thing that is the foundation that will bring amazement and good fruit. And the care of the vineyard will be given to those willing to produce good fruit and remember who the vineyard belongs to. Again, Jesus is pointing to the wondrous gracious act of G-d. The maker does not leave what was created to be destroyed and uncared for. Instead, it is given to those who are willing to embody and care for the land as was intended.

And Jesus continues, saying, “The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls.” Again echoing in many ways the words of the prophet Isaiah. Hear them people of G-d:

¹¹ The Lord spoke to me, taking hold of me and warning me not to walk in the way of this people: ¹² Don't call conspiracy all that this people calls conspiracy. Don't fear what they fear, and don't be terrified. ¹³ It is the Lord of heavenly forces whom you should hold sacred, whom you should fear, and whom you should hold in awe.

*¹⁴ God will become a sanctuary—
but he will be a stone to trip over and a rock to stumble on for the two houses of Israel;*

*a trap and a snare for those living in Jerusalem.
15 Many of them will stumble and fall,
and be broken, snared, and captured.²*

The religious leaders and those in power finally recognize that it was not someone else Jesus was talking about, but rather it was them. They were the tenants in the story. They were the ones given the job to care for the vineyard and to honor and respect the one who made it. It's this very job that should not be taken lightly or carelessly, but they did exactly that so it's quite possible the leaders were not just insulted but felt a sense of guilt in that moment.

We, ourselves, are in a place and time of repentance and reckoning. The voices of the present are calling us to turn around and see...

Mother earth is crying out. We have not taken care of her and now we can see the effects of our neglect and are being challenged to do better by caring for and being a part of restoring her.

We are being challenged to not only renounce white supremacy and racial injustice of any kind, but to also live into and embody the challenging work of accountability, not just with our words and posts, but also with our actions, our time, and our resources.

We are faced with the reality that when called to love our neighbors, those seeking refuge, those migrating, and those who have found their way across our borders, we have decided to instead react out of fear, which has resulted in harmful and violent unthinkable acts of evil and injustice.

The religious leaders are given a chance to turn around. To repent. To change and see differently, but their pride and anger keeps them from doing that very thing. Instead they decided to plot to arrest Jesus and eventually live into the violence they condemned at first.

The religious leaders in this story do not see the opportunity to change, because of their fear and anger and guilt of being broken open and exposed, we have an opportunity to see the grace given to all of us in this brokenness and our exposure. We have the chance to see G-d working among us, to see the merciful place of rebuilding and invitation to turn around and be transformed. We are not stuck in the violence we perceive and participate in. We are not stuck in the past dealings that our history tells us is true and painful. We are not crushed beyond repair. And neither were the leaders.

² Isaiah 8:11-15

How many voices of our Gen Z leaders have called out in their righteous anger to change our ways so that the generations to come would have a world that they can safely inhabit when we are gone?

How many voices of our marginalized siblings are (and have been) actively pushing us forward to seek justice and to change our perspective on the systemic oppressions many of us have to face?

You see, instead, what is beyond the walls built of fear and our own protection, is the beautiful work of the landowner who took such delight in making this vineyard. We are invited to turn around and see that for ourselves. I'm grateful for my dear friend and colleague, Pr. Micah Krey, who shared a different perspective of G-d's grace than my own. That G-d's grace can be and is often realized and felt in the moments where we are broken, exposed, and in our lowest points. It is in those moments where G-d also opens our eyes to what is possible, what is fruitful, and what is good.

"The stone that the builders rejected became the cornerstone; and it is amazing in our eyes..."

Amen