

Reflection on the Scripture: Matthew 21:33-46

[[The video of the reflection.](#)]

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.” (Matthew 21:41). *They said.* Not *Jesus said.* But, *they said.* Who are the “they”? They’re the chief priests and the Pharisees (Matthew 21:45) who have figured out that Jesus is talking about them. And they really want to arrest Jesus, but they’re afraid of the crowds.

Now this whole parable is a tough one to understand. It appears in Mark, Luke, Matthew and even the Gospel of Thomas. And with some minor changes, it’s basically the same, meaning the landowner starts the vineyard with all the gear, sends servants to collect the rent, the servants are set upon, the son is sent and killed. So in that sense, we have a fairly consistent and fairly well attested version of the story. Chances are good that Jesus said something like this, even if you allow for changes from later editors and scribes.

But the interpretation a lot of us were taught as kids: God chose the Jews, but they killed God’s son, so now the Christians are in charge of God’s vineyard, woohoo, we are the champions, doesn’t seem like any message Jesus would ever send. It’s not enough to say that old interpretation is wrong. If that’s not what the parable is saying, then what is it saying?

I’ll be honest, it’s not really clear what it’s saying. So let’s look at it the way we look at any parable of Jesus. When Jesus tells a parable, and Jesus is definitely telling a parable here because he says so flat out, *Listen to another parable* (Matthew 21:33). When Jesus tells a parable, you’re invited to step into the world of the parable. You go along in the parable’s world and everything is familiar, just like real life. And then there’s a twist. And suddenly you see the real world in a way you never saw it before.

So a rich guy sets up a vineyard (Matthew 21:33). Cool. Leases it to tenants (Matthew 21:33). Normal. Goes to another country (Matthew 21:33). A little weird, but whatever. Sends his slaves to collect the rent (Matthew 21:34). That’s what rich guys do.

The tenants beat the slaves, kill one and stone another (Matthew 21:35). Wait, what?

He sends more slaves (Matthew 21:36). Same thing happens. Huh?

He sends his son (Matthew 21:37), his son, after at least six members of his household have been killed, because according to the landowner, apparently the

issue is one of respect (Matthew 21:37). And the tenants decide to kill the son which will get them the inheritance (Matthew 21:38). On what planet does that work?

Normally, this is what we'd call the twist in the parable. Jesus underlines the moment by breaking into the world of the parable and asking a question, "Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?" (Matthew 21:40). The chief priests and the Pharisees say to Jesus, "*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.*" (Matthew 21:41). OK, that feels normal, bring the hammer down on those wicked, murdering tenants.

But Jesus doesn't say, "Preach it brother." He doesn't say, "Amen." 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'?*" (Matthew 21:42). Which is his way of saying, "wrong answer."

But how can it be the wrong answer? They murdered not one, not two, but three sets of people. If God seeks justice and righteousness as the fruit of God's vineyard, then how is this possibly the wrong answer. As an ordained minister in the United Church of Christ, I try pretty hard to not be on the same side as the chief priests and the Pharisees. It never ends well. But I can see their point.

[Pause]

And, that my brothers and sisters in Christ, is the point. We didn't stop when the parable started to go off the rails. When the landowner sent the first set of slaves to collect the rent and they were beaten, killed and stoned, we didn't stop right there. We didn't ask how did we end up in a killing rage over vegetables? What is going on that the tenants see this as their best and only option? What is their reality that this is their go to move three times over? How can they possibly have convinced themselves that if they kill enough people and throw enough bodies over the wall, they'll inherit the land? Where is all that rage and fear and violence coming from?

Do you see it? Look out into our country, our state, heck, our town and our church right now. Where is all that rage and fear and violence coming from? Before we decide what to do about the other tenants in this real world of ours, we'd better look at why it's going off the rails and work on fixing that. Because something's really wrong when we live in a world full of rage and fear and violence and we have no idea where it's coming from and what we need to do to diminish it, to give folks who feel they have so few alternatives a few more options. The fruits of the vineyard are justice and righteousness, but they don't come from suppressing violence with more violence. They come from eliminating rage and fear and violence at the root.

It's our jobs as Christians to go into these parables and stand in the shoes of Jesus' opponents and make sure we're not repeating their mistakes.¹ Even when the parable, especially when the parable, is confusing, we may miss the point of it because we're feeling so secure that Jesus can't possibly be talking to us, can't be speaking about us. "*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.*" Who said that? They said that? Or did we? We better make sure we know the answer if we want to remain as the current tenants of the vineyard.

¹ Ira Brent Driggers, "Commentary on the Gospel: Matthew 21:33-46", Working Preacher "Lectionary Commentaries for October 5, 2008, Twenty-First Sunday after Pentecost", https://www.workingpreacher.org/wp_print_all.aspx?lectionary_calendar_id=45&print_type=comm&is_spash=0 (accessed 18 June 2020).