

“Seeking a Better Understanding of What Jesus Is Saying”

Matthew 21:33–46

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I have to begin with a confession. I have avoided preaching on today’s reading from Matthew 21 for a very long time. I have been preaching from the Revised Common Lectionary most Sundays since 1991, and this text shows up every three years about this time, but I have studiously avoided it for several reasons.

It is filled with violence. In the parable, the tenants beat, stone, and kill representatives of the landowner, including his son. It has a vengeful tone. The landowner is presumed to “put those wretches to a miserable death.” And the parable has been used as a pretext for anti-Semitism. The old and evil tenants in the story, understood to be Jews, are replaced by the new and noble tenants, understood to be Christians.

Why preach on this text when the Ten Commandments show up in the reading from Exodus and Paul talks about the ongoing challenge of Christian faith in the reading from Philippians? For goodness sakes, the psalm would be more helpful than this!

And yet, when a difficult text is read, there is a need to address it. When the liturgical response to, “This is the Gospel of Christ,” is an underwhelming, “Praise be to you, O Christ...” there is a need for interpretation. The goal is not to explain away truth but to seek a better understanding of what Jesus is saying.

We begin by noting the context for this parable. Jesus is not delivering a planned speech to a random gathering of people. In this parable and the one before it about two sons, he is responding to questions about his authority asked by religious leaders — chief priests, elders, and Pharisees. And these “questions” are not simple requests for information. They are thinly-veiled attacks made by leaders who do not believe Jesus has the authority to do what he is doing, which involves straying onto their turf. So, he responds pointedly.

Context always matters. I served two churches with different views on alcohol. The founding pastor of the first was a martyr for “temperance.” He was arguing with a man over the legalization of alcohol, got upset, and started punching the man. A month later, the man got loaded, then shot and killed the preacher. Even talking about drinking was off-limits there, as was going to a dance. If it looked like it might be fun, God was agin’ it, to quote the dwarf Grumpy.

In the second church, I felt like I had accomplished something if I could keep the driver of the boat pulling skiers at the Sunday School class party under a six pack! There was even an accident where ribs were broken, but that did not get in the way of a little old fashioned Southern fun, which God wholeheartedly endorsed!

What I said about alcohol in these settings was shaped by their cultures. My views didn’t change, but one church needed to relax while the other needed to exercise more discipline. Context always matters. In our text, Jesus is responding to a challenge to his identity and calling.

Knowing this helps shape our understanding of the text and it points to a critical aspect of the story. The focus of judgment is on the very leaders who are questioning Jesus’ authority.

This parable is similar to one found in Isaiah 5, with which Jesus’ first hearers would be familiar. But in that parable, the vineyard is judged, the vineyard representing the nation. The Israelites have been unfaithful and thus failed to produce fruit, and there are consequences for this. In Jesus’ parable, the workers in the vineyard — not the vineyard itself — are judged for their actions, and well they should be.

In this time, absentee landowners are a problem. And possession of land is nine tenths of the law. So, some resistance on the part of the tenants to handing over the crop to the owner’s representatives could be expected. But for them to beat, stone, and kill these representatives, including the owner’s son, is unacceptable. They must experience consequences. They cannot be allowed to get away with murder.

But Jesus is not talking about land ownership disputes, this is a parable, and the tenants represent the leaders who have been entrusted with the care of God’s people. They have abused their power. They will even take actions

that ultimately lead to the death of God's Son. The judgment is not on the Jewish people but on their leaders.

They hear this message loud and clear. At the end of the story, the text says the chief priests and Pharisees realize Jesus is talking about them, and they want to arrest him, but Jesus has too many followers.

So, what is the message for us? First and foremost, there is no pretext for anti-Semitism here. That is not what the story is about. Jesus is not suggesting punishment for all Jewish people. He is Jewish, after all, as are his first followers.

The church will interpret Jesus' ministry — his life, death, and resurrection — as central to a new way of faith. In our reading from Philippians, the Apostle Paul says that in comparison to knowing Christ as Lord, everything else he has experienced — which has been Jewish faith — is a pile of *skubala* which we translate as “rubbish” or “dung,” but in Greek it is an intentional profanity chosen to shock the reader as a way of conveying the intensity of the contrast (Philippians 3:8).

But this is not a complete rejection of Judaism and thus all Jewish people. Writing to the church at Rome, this very same Apostle Paul insists that God has not rejected God's people, as in the Jewish faithful (Romans 11:1). Jesus' parable is not an anti-Semitic trope.

I realize some people may not think this is a concern now. It is. Anti-Semitism is alive and well, as Rabbi Dinner informed us Wednesday night, among other things, noting the bomb threats of this week. The misuse of biblical texts to motivate such hatred is not just a hypothetical possibility; it is a well-documented path to incite violence. Hitler used the twisted view that Jews killed Jesus to justify genocide.

Stories, particularly those with religious content, are powerful motivators. In fact, any forceful words can incite violent acts, no matter how much those who utter them try to deny responsibility. As Henry Fairlie said in his book *The Seven Deadly Sins Today*, “Whoever said that sticks and stones may break our bones, but words can never hurt us, must have lived among deaf mutes (p. 87).”

We need to take responsibility for our words and stories. This alone is reason enough to spend time on this challenging parable.

But there are other reasons to spend time with this text, other messages that speak to us, one of which is a calling to faithful service. Before our reading begins, Jesus tells a story about a man with two sons: one said he wouldn't work in his father's vineyard but did, one said he would work but didn't. Jesus asks the religious leaders which son did the will of the father, and they say — the one who went and worked. It's what we do that matters most, not simply what we say or believe.

This parable proclaims a similar word of encouragement to act in faithful ways. The tenants are judged because they are not faithful. They do not do what the owner asks. On the contrary, they are hostile to the owner and all his representatives. Thus, Jesus says they will be replaced with tenants who are faithful. But the implication is that those who are faithful will be rewarded. This is not an argument for works-based salvation. It's simply a statement of the obvious — how we live matters, what we do in response to grace matters, faithfulness matters.

There is a good bit of conversation today about the need for Christians to be less apologetic about our faith. I have spoken about the need for people in churches like ours to become more articulate about what we believe. But what we need even more is to live in a way that points to the character of Christ — extending kindness to others, helping the poor, welcoming the stranger, forgiving those who hurt us. If we fail to do that, it won't matter what we say.

But while this text issues a calling to faithful service, it also issues a warning about any presumption that positions of responsibility or perceived favor are beyond reproach. Jesus says religious leaders can be replaced. The work of the kingdom will be given to people who produce the fruits of the kingdom — justice and love, truth and righteousness. What might this say about our role as the privileged faithful — Christians in this nation, evangelicals in the South, male leaders in the church?

I'm not talking about our standing before God which is based on grace. I'm not entering the debate about the doctrine of eternal security, the notion "once saved, always saved." I argued about this through an entire night with a friend in college and with the aid of too much coffee. We never agreed, but we remained friends. What is at issue here is not our standing before God but our role as leaders, workers in God's field.

America was not founded as a Christian nation. The Founders institutionalized the non-establishment of religion in the First Amendment. They had experienced the consequences of state religion in Europe and desperately wanted to avoid that. But Judeo-Christian thought and Christians themselves have shaped this nation in many ways until recently when our voice seems to have weakened. Many attribute this to secularism. I think it has as much to do with our own choices.

Evangelicals in particular, which include Baptists, have had a dominant influence, especially in the South. But in recent times the unreflective marriage to the most extreme element of one party and the connection to meanness and exclusivity required has led most young adults to reject evangelicalism and the church with it. Christians at the other end of the political spectrum have often embraced the other party with little reflection, but if we are not about the work of God's realm, if we are turning people off, God will find other hands and feet.

We have not succumbed to this aspect of American evangelicalism. We are politically diverse. We welcome immigrants, we embrace LGBT people, we minister to the poor and needy. We care about the character of our leaders, no matter what their political affiliation; we are about compassion, not meanness. Anyone who visits our clothing ministry, participates in Toy Joy, or shares a food truck meal knows this, but most Americans don't do any of these things here or elsewhere. They listen to loud voices of hatred and exclusion and say to the church — no thanks.

So, the church's role in our culture cannot be taken for granted nor should evangelicals presume to have a prominent voice if they are not about God's work, and perhaps men, most of all, ought to be on-guard. We have ordained women in this church since the nineteenth century and we have had female staff ministers for a half century, but in the larger church, men have been in-charge mostly for nearly 2,000 years. How well have we fared? Perhaps it is time for women to have more of a voice.

Nothing is set in stone for the church, evangelicals, or men. God entrusts the realm to those who produce fruit worthy of it. That is the message of Jesus' parable. Whether it is good news or bad news is up to us. May we be among those who produce fruit worthy of God's realm!