

Listen to Another Parable
Matthew 21.33-46; 22.1-14
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Pentecost +19A
(Includes scripture from 10.8.17 cancelled service)
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This one isn't easy. Jesus is sharply critical—even repulsed—by the way 1st century Judaism is being practiced—more marketplace than worship gathering, more guidelines of social strata than welcoming table for all. He is critical of the human ways of wandering from the path of God and is urging them to turn or re-turn. This table flipping scene is a bold statement against the practices they call sacred.

Here's the tricky thing: The story of scripture is a repeated invitation from God to humanity as God longs to create a beloved community. And the human response is to say "yes" then build an institution. This response looks rather unofficial at first—tribal notions of who loves God and knows God and who does not which extend to notions of who IS LOVED BY God and known by God and who is not. The human story in scripture, from the very first of us created beings, is doubting the words of God as true. How big is God's love? Is there really enough for all of us? Wouldn't it be better to have a human leader to guide us than a Divine one? And the call to repent comes over and over from wandering prophets and unexpected leaders—return to the path of God.

By the time we get to Jesus completely and utterly fed up by the way his 1st century faith tradition has organized itself, we see a much more sophisticated system of how the tradition has become institutionalized. The leaders of that system question Jesus' response with a version of, "Who do you think you are? Who gave you the right to come in here and criticize how we do things and attack us in our own space?" Some people are watching and listening and saying to each other, "Yeah! Where did he get this authority? I'm with him. He's right. Let's tear this whole system to the ground and start over!" But the people protecting the system, those good folks who had given their lives to their faith community, are watching and listening and saying to each other, "Where did he get this authority? What are we going to do? He's going to tear this whole system to the ground. We must stop him."

Now I always want to pause right here when we're in the Gospels and clearly reading a 2000 year old critique of a particular expression within Judaism. It is dangerous and

easy to skim these texts and lay burden on an entire religious tradition. To do so is easy because there really is anti-semitism in our sacred texts as the writers were making the case that their emerging tradition was more legitimate than the one from which they came. And to do so is dangerous because the de-legitimizing of Judaism (and any other religious path) creates more us/them dichotomies at best (part of what Jesus is teaching against here) and supports a holocaust, at worst.

So when we read this text, we do so with those guiding questions—what does this text tell us about who God is? And what does this text tell us about humanity in relation to God? It is the way of ALL HUMANS to order themselves and then call the structures of that ordering normative. This is our experience, therefore, it is the best and truest experience. In the very particular context of a community of faith in that snapshot of time, he is pushing hard against the human urge to create exclusive, fixed structures that encourage normal and other, us and them, best and worst.

If we're going to put the blame anywhere or read a faith community with a harsh lens, it absolutely must be our own. And not merely our circle in here but the larger church in the United States of which we are a part. It is often our default here to mark the ways we are not like the rest of the church, or those churches, or that particular group. We're not wrong on that point. We really aren't like any other Baptist church in this town. We really aren't like very many Baptist churches in this state. We know our differences and our history in here, and it's easy for us to rest on the nuance of that truth. To understand these parables, we must understand we are part of systems—even systems we dislike.

Allow me to make this personal—as I shared on Wednesday night, I've entered into the work of Undoing Racism with the People's Institute for Survival and Beyond. I shared with a couple dozen of you my struggle with ego—I recognize I want to get credit for my anti-racism work or receive some kind of badge to wear that indicates I'm farther along an anti-racism path than some of my white brothers and sisters. And to admit all of that is a way of saying, I want to distance myself from the white experience. I want to be able to say, "Well, I'm not a tiki torch carrying racist. I'm not *THAT* kind of white." But walking around in the world with the ease and benefits that people called white enjoy, I can't separate myself in any way from the structures and institutions created for people like me.

Here's another example: I attended a panel discussion one night last week at Tulane hosted by the NOLA Wesley student ministry, and the panel was past and present students who identify as LGBTQ and Christian. For about 90 minutes, they answered questions, told stories, and shared a similar journey of clinging to the Jesus Way in

spite of congregations that told they they cannot be who they are and be Christian. And quite often, that abusive teaching also extends a step further—you cannot be who you are and be loved by God. We bristle at that in here, and I'm glad we do. I'm so grateful and proud we are a congregation working toward a bigger, wider, more winding table that seats all. I'm so grateful and proud we believe the love of God is unlimited.

But guess what? 75% of that panel identified as "recovering Baptist." So even if the reality of their stories is that a handful of people in one congregation far away from here attacked and rejected their truth, they spoke for all of us when they did that. There is tremendous repair to be done even if we're not *that* kind of Christian or *that* kind of Baptist. We cannot separate ourselves from the systems and institutions whose names we bear—whether that's the constructs of race, the broad category of Christian in the U.S., or the more narrow category of Baptist in the South. We are part of all kinds of human collectives.

In his book *Becoming an Anti-Racist Church*, Rev. Joe Barndt reminds us, "In order to understand the institutional nature of the church, we need to go all the way back to the time of its creation, when it began as a small secret religious movement, hidden on the back streets of Jerusalem and other cities in the Middle East. It is the nature of every movement, including religious movements, to start off without much internal organization. However, as movements grow in size, both numerically and geographically, the need emerges for organizational structure, and soon an institution begins to emerge. This is what happened in the early church. Although it started out as a religious movement, the church very quickly became institutionalized."

Next, he adds, "the church became nationalized; it became a part of the state...it is not difficult to imagine the jockeying for power as the church became increasingly friendly with the emperor and engaged in political maneuvering for greater favor and positions of power. The church may have started as a small movement of believers practicing communal sharing, but it was not long before it became an international organization, seeking to preserve the purity of the gospel in the context of hierarchy, authority, and institutional expansion."¹

I say all of that to draw us into solidarity and identity with the movement Jesus is criticizing in these chapters of Matthew. When we read ourselves into the story, we must be honest about where we are in our own journey. As dominant religious tradition enjoying ease and benefits in this country because of our majority position, we are part

¹ Joseph Barndt, *Becoming an Anti-Racist Church*, pp. 118-119

of the institutions and systems as a whole that protect and draw lines and keep out. Even if you and I in here don't identify that way, let me be clear: folks who feel they are on the outside do not see the difference. There is no badge or label on the front of our building that removes us from a movement. And that is tremendously uncomfortable.

When Jesus is railing against the brood of vipers in the temple courts who created a structure that keeps poor people out and women out and sinners out and anyone marked less than out, we absolutely must hear that critique and allow it to settle in around us. Rather than the initially defensive, "Well, we're not like that here. I'm not like that in my life. That's not for me." We must welcome the opportunity to consider, "How are we like that here? How am I like that in my life? How is this word for me? And what are we gonna do about it?"

Because Jesus then goes into two parables—hard to read and dripping with violence just as much as they are beautifully expansive and dripping with grace. Remember these are metaphors and allegories. We can't draw exact parallels or create a decoder chart. We hear the story as a story and then sit with the lessons it offers.

There were people working land that was not theirs but had been given to them instead. But they treated it like it was possession and not gift. And they rejected any reminder that it belonged to someone else who had his own ideas about how the hardest on his land was to be treated. They didn't just reject the reminder, they violently protected what they had come to believe was theirs. And the people listening to the story knew the actions of the tenants in the story were abysmal and against the accepted norms of how that relationship would have worked in their world of the 1st century. When Jesus asks his listeners what they assume the landowner would do with the tenants, the listening crowd replies, "He'll put those wretches to death and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the harvest time." If they have forgotten the vineyard is not theirs, if they have forgotten the expected rules of kindness and respect and hospitality, if they have forgotten that they answer to the landowner, then the landowner will tear the whole thing down and start over with tenants who want to be part of the system he is creating.

Then he spoke to them again in parables with a story of representatives from his household—workers in the kingdom of God? divine servants of God's work in the world?—going out to invite anyone and everyone to a wedding banquet. The servants gathered anyone who wanted to come—the good and the bad. When people don't want to come, the king destroys the city. When someone shows up for the event as a spectator but doesn't come to the table as a full participant (dressed in the wedding

robe), the king throws him out. It's another dark and violent story that's also full of grace and glimpses of God's kingdom.

Pastor Erick J. Thompson comments, "By sending out his troops to destroy the people and their 'city,' the king is destroying our human notions that what we have done and built has value when it comes to the wedding banquet, the kingdom of heaven. Instead, the king invites everyone in the main streets: the good and the bad, the non-elite."²

I have been reading these parables for a couple of weeks now and have decided I'm not too interested in the violence of the parables. I think it's there to shock us into paying attention. I don't read these as a direct character description of the nature of God to be wrathful or some doomsday, looming violence that is heading our way. No, as I read I am drawn to God's willingness to abandon the vineyard, give the kingdom away, welcome the good and the bad who want to show up at the table, to follow the fruitfulness of people who "get it" and are living out the essence of God's dreams rather than honoring the human structures and institutions that religious people always always invent.

As I consider all of the undoing work that we in the church in the United States are facing at the beginning of the 21st century, I'm really leaning into the need for reformation that these parables invite. We're at the 500 year mark of the Reformation this fall, and I find myself coming back to Phyllis Tickle's thesis that every 500 years, the Church goes through a rummage sale, and cleans out the old forms of spirituality and replaces it with new ones.³ These parables are calling us to be reformers. What tables need to be flipped over right now and left upended? What systems and institutions really just need to be knocked down so that a new, fresh expression of God's story can be told? Is there a chance we may be spectators at the great banquet table of God who ultimately do not want to be clothed in the robes of the kingdom? Are we actually giving ourselves to this story of God's expansive welcome and beloved community cobbled together out of the good and the bad and the tax collectors and the prostitutes?

Karoline Lewis observes, "Indeed, it is not enough anymore to call yourself a follower of Christ and then act as if you were sound asleep during the Sermon on the Mount. It is not enough to pledge allegiance to church membership without then vowing to live

² http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3443

³ <https://vialogue.wordpress.com/2008/04/27/the-great-emergence-phyllis-tickles-500-year-rummage-sale/>

out that chosenness in the world. It is not enough say you are a 'Christian' and then stay silent when life, liberty, and love are in jeopardy."⁴ Quoting Sharon Ringe, she adds, "...it appears that Matthew envisions further accountability beyond one's initial response of discipleship, our 'yes!' to God's invitation to the banquet."

"I wonder if the decline of mainline Protestantism is because we have been satisfied with just getting people in the pews and once we get them there, we are so happy they showed up that we have forgotten that accountability comes with discipleship. I wonder if people aren't coming to church because our preaching perpetuates a passive faith. I wonder if a Christianity that is not Evangelicalism has lost its voice in the public sphere because we have caved to the idolatry of maintaining the status quo. [Or as Stanley Hauerwas puts it], 'Christians in modernity thought their task was to make the Gospel intelligible to the world rather than to help the world understand why it could not be intelligible without the Gospel.'"

So what do we do with all of this? What do we do with a Jesus who flips over the tables of abuse within the systems we have created and loved in a genuine attempt to experience and honor God together? What do we do with the stories of Jesus' teaching that say God will continue to work outside of our systems and even in spite of them because God is creating a bigger, wider, more winding table where all who want to feast are welcome? What do we do with the radical invitation of God to harvest the vineyard as co-workers with God? To feast and live and laugh and love beyond the boundaries of our comfort?

For almost four years now people have asked what my plan is for this church. What's your vision? Can you write it out in a document with an achievable trajectory? The historical-Baptist-ness in me rejects the notion that the pastor alone charts the course and steers the ship. But recognizing that I am a faith leader, I know part of my calling is catching hold of a vision and inviting others to see it, too. A friend who attends Trinity Church invited me to lunch recently for conversation around some of these themes, and he repeatedly asked me, "What's your goal for your church?" I've been sitting with that for a few weeks now because it doesn't hit me as quite the right question, but it's a valid one, nonetheless.

It's not my church, first of all. It's ours together and it's God's. And we know good and well that God can and will flip the tables and tear down the structure if the path of God is better followed outside of what we humans have built. It's important that we remember it isn't mine. And it isn't yours. We belong to each other and to God.

⁴ <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=4980>

I think the question I would ask is what is my prayer for each of you and for The Church in the United States as we move deeper into the 21st century?

I pray that we will understand that the Jesus Way is a movement of our lives and not a meeting in a museum. God has always been calling a people to honor the image of God within them by living as co-workers and co-creators in this world. Jesus gives us a picture of what that kind of living and loving and having one's being on the path of God looks like. We humans are given building an ark to harness God, a tabernacle on a mountain to capture the holy, a rule book for keeping score of who is getting it best and right and who is getting it wrong and worst, a structure that ultimately wins our devotion and time and money and energy rather than the hovering wind of Spirit, the creation imaging and speaking God, the table flipping and banquet setting Jesus who wants us to be on his Way together. I pray that we will get this. That our lives will be shaped and ultimately transformed by the movement of God as seen in Jesus the Christ and that we will be known as a people who are fiercely welcomed and fiercely welcoming in the way of Christ's love. This is my prayer. Amen.