

BIBLE READING: Matthew 21:33-43

SERMON

After last week's sermon about the confusing parable of the undecided sons, I was thinking about what preachers do when they preach about the parables.

Being preached to on a parable can sometimes feel like you're standing before Uluru and the tour guide is standing right in your line of vision. Or a Parks officer starts explaining the way the rock was formed and goes into detail about weathering and tectonic plates till your brain begins to go mushy! Or one of the aboriginal custodians explains the spiritual nature of the rock, distracting you from your own spiritual reaction and engagement.

While it may be important to know that you're looking at a large rock and not a mountain, you don't want anyone talking into your face. There is a place, of course, for all of those details about geological history and aboriginal tradition and spirituality – but not in the exact moment you're trying to experience the wonderful creation.

Parables are these precious gems and we preachers often like to smash them open to see what's inside. These tightly packed tales are meant to confound and amaze, to evoke and provoke – to hit you in the gut and to run a shiver down your spine. Their creative power is more forceful in your experience of it than in an explanation of it.

So, whatever it was that you felt as you heard our Gospel text read to you this morning, keep it with you. Whatever immediately struck you when you let this story wash over you, tuck that away. If it was anger or confusion or disbelief or amazement, hold onto that experience; it will be the key to your engagement with this parable.

As for the preacher: there are many perils ahead. They are required to remark on such a text, even if they are tempted to let the parable do all the work and sit back down without saying a word. But one must risk ruining your experience, even if for a moment, to offer a few remarks on this parable. At worst, this sermon will distract you from the story in front of you. At best, it may shine a dim light on this parable ever so slightly. Preachers generally are aiming for somewhere in the middle.

There is much that could be said about this parable. We could discuss the basic structure and arc of the story: there are tenants who kill everyone who comes to get the harvest of the vineyard, even the son of the landowner. We could remark on the connections it shares with Isaiah 5, another passage about a vineyard; though Isaiah is much more interested in the destruction of the vineyard itself (i.e. Israel) than those who go to the vineyard to collect its harvest. Then there's the way that each character in our parable is matched up with figures in the ancient world: the slaves likely stand in for the various prophets throughout Israel's history, Jesus himself is more easily recognizable as the son of the landowner, and the tenants are the notorious Pharisees and chief priests.

But one part of this story that is worth noticing and lingering on is the simple fact that Jesus does not finish his own parable. He sets up an entire story without an ending. Instead, he ends his parable by asking a question to his listeners, those chief priests and Pharisees. Jesus asks them, "Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?"

Filled with a great sense of justice and a dash of vengeance, the listeners answer 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."

Jesus neither confirms nor contradicts their answer.

But soon, after some further explanation by Jesus, it dawns on those chief priests and Pharisees: are we those violent tenants? Is he talking about us? Have we rejected – and killed – the slaves and sons of the landowner? Is he blaming us for the rejection of Israel's prophets? And in their violent and vindictive answer, the chief priests and the Pharisees indict themselves. They name the punishment they would give their own behavior. And it is a harsh one.

The issue at hand is their rejection of the prophets of the Lord. And ultimately, their rejection of the Lord's son.

Because as we know, their rejection, matched with the Roman authorities' power to execute, will lead to Jesus' actual death. That they have rejected Jesus does not exist solely on the plane of parables, but also on the very real hill at Calvary.

What is it to us? So what? Some chief priests and Pharisees two thousand years ago rejected Jesus as the son of God... what might that have to do with us?

That Jesus was rejected by those he came to save is evident in our lives, too. We cannot be too quick to distance ourselves from those who were unable to see Jesus for who he was in that time and age; they are us, and we are them. Their rejection of Jesus is our own inevitable participation in Good Friday, our own complicity in the death-dealing forces of this world, our own inability to see before us the son of God. This is where the parable threatens to shatter us.

That we take part in big and small ways in the death of Jesus should be no surprise; in our neglect of the poor, our dismissal of the outcast, our apathy toward the immigrant, we do our part in rejecting Jesus. That we so quickly pick and choose the teachings of Jesus we'd like to follow and those we wouldn't is our participation in his rejection. That we judge the sins of others but refuse to see our own is how we continue to reject the grace and forgiveness offered in the person of Jesus. That we sing praises of his name and then shout, "Crucify him!" as part of the angry crowd is our rejection of our Lord.

But again, we'll do well to remember that Jesus does not finish the parable in our text. What he does offer is a quotation from Psalm 118: "The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone."

That Jesus still came and comes to those he knew would reject him may be the most vibrant and wondrous thing of them all. That he would willingly give himself over to the authorities and principalities and walk through the door of death is the truth we are called to behold today. Despite our rejection and complicity and failings and judgments and violent ways and self-wielding indictments – despite all of ourselves – Jesus comes to us. And he is for us. And with us.

Jesus will ultimately finish his parable when he bursts through the tomb of death. He will finish the parable when he rises from the grave. You see, the answer to the question: "When the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?" is found in the resurrection of Jesus. The answer to this parable's question is grace upon grace for all who have rejected him. It is forgiveness. It is new life. It is always another chance.

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