

21st Week after Pentecost, Proper 22 – Year A – October 5, 2008
Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20; Psalm 19; Philippians 3:4b-14; Matthew 21:33-46
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“Parables judge us effectively because they are about relations, and their judgment invites a changing of relations,” declares theologian Sallie McFague.

Today’s Gospel story comes swiftly on the heels of Jesus’ healing and teaching of the people in the temple, and the challenge to Jesus’ authority from the leaders and elders in Jerusalem. Given the questions from last week’s Gospel reading about John the Baptist and his authority, it is already evident that there is some change in the balance of power going on and the Judean leaders are not happy about that. In the parable Jesus shares, the rich landlord of the vineyard ostensibly has all the power. In his absence, the tenants start to believe that possession really is nine tenths of the law, and want to keep the crop for themselves. Still under the illusion that his tenants will pay their dues, the landlord sends slaves as his messengers, and when they are either beaten, stoned or killed, he sends his son. I hope your eyebrows are raised at this point. I have a very hard time with the logic of this sentence. “Finally he sent his son to them, saying ‘they will respect my son.’” If past behavior is the best predictor of future behavior, then we cannot be surprised by the violent response of the tenants, but I am frankly astonished by the landowner’s decision to send his son. Back to the tenants. In their scheming, they now suppose that they will be the new owners. Not so. In fact, the owner comes and kills the tenants, then gives the vineyard to others. Jesus then links that new arrangement of power with some words from Psalm 118, “The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord’s doing, and it is amazing in our eyes.”

“Parables judge us effectively because they are about relations. Their judgment invites a changing of relations.” When this parable is viewed as allegory, the landlord represents God. Jesus is supposed to be the Son and heir, who is brutally murdered by the tenants. The prophets of God are the slaves, and the corrupt leaders of the people of Judea are the wicked tenants. But where does that leave us? A pretty allegorical box does not challenge the language of violence, especially the violence of the landowner, and it places the action in a distant land under a thick layer of dusty time. Our temptation is to hastily tie up the ribbon on the box without letting the story judge me, or judge you. Our task is to think twice about replacing this box in the closet without permitting the story trapped inside to invite us to a change of relations.

Jesus is a man of his day. In the first century, this parable is no mere allegory. An unpleasant fact of life that Jesus saw day in and day out was the massive chasm between the rich and the poor. It is an unnatural, human-made abyss. The walls of the canyon bear the scars of constant battles for power and control. Looking into the valley below, we see the ordinary folks who work the land, bowed down by the dual burdens of Roman taxation and obligations to their own religious leaders. The laborers are caught between the immovable rock of Rome and the hardened hearts of their leaders. For them debt is a way of life. Meanwhile the wealthy routinely acquire more land from the poor farmers through repossessions in lieu of debts that they cannot ever hope to pay back. The land is then leased to tenant farmers. In other words, more and more of the poor become indentured servants to the wealthy.

These are the people gathered at the Temple in Jerusalem listening to Jesus’ teachings. They recognize their own powerlessness as the tenant servants of the wealthy landowners. Perhaps they could see the Temple leaders listening furtively for anything Jesus might say that they could use against him. The leaders know what they are doing; they know that they have put their own interests ahead of God’s will. They know that they have failed to listen to the prophets, and they have put aside John the Baptist’s call to repentance. They know that they are exploiting their own kith and kin for the sake of money, land and power. It is then quite ironic, how fearful these leaders are. They are afraid to arrest Jesus because they fear losing the respect and authority of the people. When Jesus tells this parable, they recognize

themselves immediately, and they are frightened of Jesus' prophetic message that that the kingdom will be taken from them. They also fear losing their privileged status as functional ambassadors between the Judean people and the Roman rulers. While the Roman authorities oppress *all* the people, the leaders of the Temple struggle with their own oppression by becoming oppressors. It is a familiar cycle of the abuse of power.

When we look at the parable through the eyes of the oppressed, it starts to look a little different. The tenant farmers in the story are trying to reclaim their family land, resisting the injustice of the extortionate taxes that have left them with no choice but to enter into indentured slavery. Like many who are oppressed then and now, they come to feel that violence is their only option. Sadly, the escalating violence of the story hardly fazes us. Is it because we see it on the news often, and hear about it daily, such that it has become just another norm of life? Yet it is not the way of God. Jesus is the Prince of Peace. The fruit of the Holy Spirit is love, joy and peace, not fear, hatred, and violence.

In our allegorical box, the landowner is supposed to be God. You and I know that cannot be true. And I believe that the people in the Temple know it too. On the other hand, given the violent resistance of the tenants, it seems likely that a wealthy human landlord would be quite at ease executing his own type of justice to secure his land and wealth. Matthew is very much concerned with letting the Judean leaders, you and me, know that this type of inequality, injustice and oppression does not a reflect kingdom living. Nonetheless, even with this new look at the parable we are still stuck in a time warp. What is our place in this story? How is this story judging us today? How is it inviting you and me to changes in our relations?

At this point, we must turn to the curious character of the rejected stone. It is Jesus, the one in whom all authority and power rightfully rests. He is our rock and our redeemer, the living cornerstone and foundation of all life and faith. Jesus is the one who judges our hearts with love and compassion. Jesus is the one who gently prompts us to let go of our illusion of power and control so that we might not stumble in our journey of faith. Jesus is the rock upon which lean when we are tired or discouraged. Jesus is the rock that is a guide along our way. Jesus calls us to consider our roles in this story. The parable judges me, and it judges you, especially in our duality of roles: the poor and the rich, the oppressed and the oppressor. The story challenges me to ask many questions. Like the difference between the spiraling violence of the world, and God's kingdom of peace. In the name of Jesus, I have to ask myself – we all do: What do my food choices and the labels on my clothes reveal? Are others suffering so I can eat well? Do the labels in my clothes condemn me for exploiting grossly underpaid women and even children in Mexico or China? In the name of our rock and our redeemer, I have to ask myself the hard questions that a comfortable life demands. Whom have I tripped by putting my own wants and needs before those of others, or who have I crushed with a thoughtless word?

“Parables judge us because they are about relations. Their judgment invites us to a changing of relations.” In God's infinite love, you and I have a unique opportunity to open up some of the boxes of our hearts and minds, find ourselves in God's own story of redemption, and to put right our relations. We are *all* invited to yield to God's grace and the power of the Holy Spirit. The still small voice calls each of us to transformed relations within ourselves, with God, and with one another. When we get out of our own boxes, we see beyond ourselves and welcome those outside of this community into relations with us. God invites you and me to participate more and more in continuing the work begun in Christ Jesus. These ministries change lives and yield an abundance of God's love and grace. God invites you and me to move from shadowy fear to brilliant hope; and from selfish control, to selfless giving for the sake of justice. At the heart of each of these invitations to change, there is another invitation to grow in the steadfast love of God. Only God's love makes change possible. Only God's love makes change holy.

Amen.