

Matthew 21:33-46

“Listen to another parable. There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a wine press in it, and built a watchtower. Then he leased it to tenants and went to another country. When the harvest time had come, he sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his produce. But the tenants seized his slaves and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. Again he sent other slaves, more than the first; and they treated them in the same way. Finally he sent his son to them, saying, ‘They will respect my son.’ But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, ‘This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance.’ So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him. Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?” 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.” Jesus said to them, “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’? Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom. The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls.” When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they realized that he was speaking about them. They wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowds, because they regarded him as a prophet.

Love God and love your neighbor—all of the commandments hang on these. That’s what Jesus said once, in response to a pop quiz from some of his detractors. They asked him which of the commandments was the greatest, thinking they would trick Jesus. Trip him up...

But instead Jesus answered, clearly and confidently: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

I've always thought it was a beautiful concept—that you could boil down all of the thou-shalts and thou-shalt-nots, all of the stories and parables, all of the instructions that we hear throughout scripture, distill them to their deepest meaning, and come out in the end—not with a laundry list, or to-do list, or fearful try-harder-be-better list, but with, simply, "love."

Dr. Marty Stevens, a beloved seminary professor, spoke of the commandments this way:

She'd have us picture a heavy wooden door: the door is the law, the commandments. And it opens and closes—it literally hangs—on two hinges, just like any other door...

These two hinges, though, are particularly special and exceedingly simple: Love God. Love each other.

All of the law and the prophets, everything you've ever been told about the divine and about yourself—all of it literally hangs on these two. Without these hinges upon which to hang, the whole door is useless. Everything falls apart.

With them, though—with *love*—everything works exactly as it was created to. The door swings *wide* open, inviting people in. The door closes, providing safe sanctuary and refuge, peace and quiet.

Love God. Love each other. Everything hinges on it.

It would seem to me that neither the tenants nor the landowner from our parable today ever got the message about the necessity and primacy of love.

On the contrary, the parable we've heard this morning is a story of humanity at its *worst*: A story of greed—where everyone wants not only their share of the produce the vineyard brings forth, but *all* of the bounty for themselves.

The tenants of the vineyard have been working the land and bringing forth a harvest, and now their boss—the owner of the land—has come to collect.

But the tenants don't want to pay up. They don't want to give the landowner what is his. They don't recognize his authority, or his sovereignty, or his dignity. They just want what they want, when and how they want it. And they're willing to do anything to keep what they've decided is theirs.

Far from loving God and loving neighbor, what we have this morning begins as a story of human greed, which is bad enough. But then it escalates, becoming a story of indiscriminate violence. A willingness—almost a giddy desire on the part of the vineyard tenants—to harm and kill in order to get what they want.

What we hear this morning is a story about the oft-called “wicked” tenants beating, killing, stoning one person after another. First slaves and messengers, sent by the landowner. And then the landowners own son. Which is a shocking turn of events. Because that—*that*—would have been

akin to killing the landowner *himself*. Because to send ones son *was* to send a part of oneself.

And so, without concern for class, race, station, rights, dignity; without concern for human life and relationships—all the family members and friends who would be missing their loved ones; without logic. Without compassion, conversation, or the least bit of concern, the tenants opened fire on everyone they saw.

And then, as if *that* horrific, indiscriminate violence weren't enough. The original hearers of the parable finish the story in grand fashion. Right? Jesus stops telling the parable here, at this point, and asks the crowd, "now what will the landowner do to those tenants?"

And the *crowd* writes the ending.

They say—*the people* decide—that the only possible ending to the parable of the wicked tenants would be for the landowner to finally return to his vineyard, and—out of a twisted sense of justice—put everyone he finds there to a “miserable death.”

Jesus leaves the end of the story up to the people, and they write total annihilation into scripture.

It seems to me that humanity has always been awfully, terrifyingly good at *that*.

We are—as a people—slaves to violence. Simultaneously addicted to its entertainment value, the power it pretends to yield, and fearful of its advent in our lives.

This week, following the massacre in Las Vegas, we feel ourselves acutely trapped by this master of ours: grieving, watching, raging, questioning, fearing, imploring.

Why must we hear yet *another* story of indiscriminate terror and violence?

And when will we be free of it?

From a very practical perspective it must be said that there *is* something we *can* do. We can take automatic weapons out of the hands of civilians.

We can stand up and say that there is simply no reason for someone to own a gun designed not for hunting or self-protection, but explicitly and exclusively for killing as many people and quickly as possible.

We can say that. Demand change. We can, and I pray we will.

But there is yet still more at play here than mass shootings.

When will we be free from our slavery to violence? *All* of the very human ways we hurt each other?

Even those of us who have never picked up a gun. Because lord knows we can do plenty of damage with our words and our actions.

That, we'll need some help with. That, is where Jesus shows up for us.

See, in our parable this morning, Jesus tells a story about human greed and human violence, and when given the opportunity to write the ending, the crowd around Jesus once again chose more greed and more violence. An endless cycle, and, trapped in it, we're left feeling a too-familiar kind of hopeless.

But it doesn't have to be that way.

Because, beloveds, the truth is, it is not us but *God* who plants the vineyard. Who takes great care in preparing the land to be farmed.

It is *God* who sets up a well, and builds a toolshed with hands weathered from an eternity of tending to creation.

It is *God* who invites *us* to come and live and grow things. To water the grapes and make wine. To watch the sun rise and set over the land.

It is *God*, after all, who owns the land—*all of it*—and puts us in it. It is *God* who makes it home for us.

And we are mere tenants. Sometimes overzealous. Sometimes overconfident. Sometimes greedy. Prone to making poor choices. God *knows* this. God knows our hearts and our limitations, our hopes and our fears. Our doubts.

But when God comes to collect the produce of the land, God will gift us an incredibly generous portion *anyway*, would we simply recognize God's grace as it comes ever closer to us. Would we recognize God's own son in our midst.

Would we set down our weapons and welcome the Spirit as she walks our way.

See, there's plenty to go around in the vineyard God has planted.

There is no need, here, for greed or protectionism, hate or fear. There is no need to raise a gun—in fact, here, in the vineyard God has planted, the guns have all been transformed into plowshares so that we can better be about the work at hand.

Here, in the vineyard of God, the tenants are well fed. There is plenty of wine to keep us in reverie, produce to provide for our needs.

Here, we are cared for and we are *safe*.

And this *paradise* is the *same* vineyard from our parable this morning. The only difference is that in *God's* version of the parable, violence and hatred *never* win in the end.

In *God's* version of the parable, God sends a son. Comes to us in Jesus. And no matter how many times we reject this son, or fail to recognize him when he stands right in front of us—Jesus remains the cornerstone of the whole operation. Steadily breaking away at our hard hearts.

This is, after all, *God's* vineyard. It cannot stand without God in it and through it, behind and before it. Above and below it. Supporting it and loving it.

And that is just what Jesus does. Even when we go as far as to *nail him to a cross*, he doesn't. stay. dead.

That is to say, beloveds, in God's version of the story, *love wins*. No matter what.

The commandments are written to guide our life together in the vineyard, and were we all able to heed them perfectly the world would be a perfect place. But we are tenants here, after all, and we aren't perfect. And we are keenly aware that the world is not perfect. Far from it.

So, as we struggle through hard times together—as we continue to learn how to grow and heal and nurture—let's take a lesson from the generous God who plants the vineyard, and the gracious Jesus who loves us despite everything, and the powerful Spirit, who inspires us to get up every morning and try planting something new again:

When the world gets overwhelming and scary and you're not sure what to do next. Love God. Love each other. And remember, too, that you are loved.

Everything hinges on it.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.