

Year A, Pentecost 16, Proper 22
October 2, 2011
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Matthew 21:33-46

The Rejected Stone

In today's gospel Jesus is still responding to the angry temple officials who met him the day after he upset their routine and defied their authority by creating an uproar in the temple. Jesus now asks them to "listen to another parable."

It is a very earthy story involving a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a wine press in it, and built a watchtower. The infrastructure is all there for a profitable wine making business with processing facilities and security systems all in place. He then leases it to tenants and goes to another country.

When it is time to harvest his grapes he sends his slaves to the tenants to collect the produce and the tenants seize them; beat one up, kill another and stone yet another. They do not want to give this landowner what he is owed.

Our land owner is very determined. He sends even more slaves, more than before, and these get treated the same way.

Finally in an act of incredible bravery, naivety or stupidity our persistent landlord sends his son saying, "They will respect my son." Apparently this landowner's doctrine of humanity is very high. He must have thought they thought like he thought. He was quite wrong.

The words, "bravery, naivety or stupidity" remind me of a conversation I had at The Father's Heart on Tuesday (The Father's Heart is a ministry to the homeless in Clackamas, Oregon). I was talking with Rodger and Sarah who live under the bridge at the base of 12th street in Oregon City. We had gotten into conversation when Roger said that he was looking for a tarp and wondered if any church supplied them as part of their ministry. His girl friend and he had gotten up at 4 a.m. the night before because it had begun to rain and they didn't have a tarp to sleep under. As Roger spoke, I was

thinking about a conversation I had with a newly homeless woman a couple of months ago who said she was too afraid to sleep in the open for fear of being attacked. Thinking about this, I said, "It must feel quite vulnerable to sleep out in the open like that. Anybody with a desire to let off steam can just take it out on you." "Yes", he said, "a drunk comes along and they want to attack you while you are sleeping. Nobody who sees it is going to call the police. That's why I always sleep with a heavy stick so that I can take care of my girlfriend and me if I have to. I would rather be the beater and than the beaten." I wondered to myself what you do when the other guy has a gun. He then said people find his stuff that he has stashed in the bushes and they throw it all over just for the fun of it. They do it because they can. I thought about our human inclination to take our frustrations out on the vulnerable and how this couple would have no difficulty relating to that experience. I asked, "What do you do when you find your stuff gone?" He smiled, shrugged his shoulders and said "start over."

Here was a man fully aware of the world's cruelty and nearly helpless to prevent it. I don't know how he came to be in that situation. I do know that he had committed himself to protecting his girl friend and so he was lucky, as there was someone in his life. He was quite unlike our landowner who didn't seem to anticipate the depth of evil in the tenants who leased his land—somehow he had always expected them to honor and respect him more and seemed surprised when they didn't. Maybe God, who the Landlord represents, has been surprised that we have turned out the way we have. Maybe when he sent his son into our world he really did believe that we would receive him, hear his message and change our ways. If so, he was quite wrong and with Jesus entering into Jerusalem for his final week we would soon see how wrong he was.

Back to the story. "When the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, 'This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance.'" They recognize him for who he is and they plot to kill him. In this way they seem to think they can acquire the vineyard. Does that make sense to you? Do you think they can make the vineyard their own by killing the owner's son? What if the vineyard in the story is a stand in for the Kingdom of God? Can you enter the Kingdom of God this way? Their thinking seems to be distorted by their desire to be their own authority, accountable to no one.

“So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him.” For the second Sunday in a row Jesus’ story ends with a question, “Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?” The temple authorities immediately answer and in the way I would were it not for the gospel. They say, “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.”

Their language is strong and vindictive. “Put those wretches to a miserable death.” Don’t just kill them, make their dying miserable. Torture them. Make them pay. Put them to death and enjoy it. Doesn’t it make you feel good to talk like this? I can just see Clint Eastwood saying, “Go ahead; make my day.”

“And then after the bad guys are dead, lease the vineyard to tenants who will give the owner his due—that’s what the landowner should do,” they solemnly assert. But what if the temple is the vineyard in this story and they, its leaders, are in the process of throwing out the owner’s son? What if they are the ones refusing to hand over the fruit of this bountiful garden, leased to them for a time? What if the fruits are compassion, love and forgiveness rather than the grapes of wrath? What if their vineyard is to supply the world with this new wine and not be just their private label? This is World Communion Sunday.

Suddenly Jesus drops this line of thought and picks up another. “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.”

It is a quote from Psalm 118; an ancient hymn of gratitude. It is an incredible quote that contains the heart of the gospel. “The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone (the capstone in the NIV).” The capstone is the stone that makes the rest of the building hang together. It is at the top of the arch and locks the rest of the building in place. Without it, the building cannot long stand and will fall in, on itself.

I believe Jesus is the stone the builders rejected who has become the cornerstone; the capstone. And at that very moment the temple leaders are in the process of rejecting him. They are doing the very thing this ancient text says they will. Yet even the rejection seems to be part of the plan. Had he not been rejected he would not be suitable for capstone duty. This whole thing is the Lord's doing and it is amazing in our eyes. It blows our minds and reorients our world.

Now the temple authorities are about to wake up. Listen to what Jesus says that wakes them! "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." Jesus says they are going to be thrown out and new people, people who actually do what God wants, installed in their place. Could that happen to us? Could that happen to the church today?

He then says, "The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls." The power of this rejected stone that has become the cornerstone is unstoppable; it breaks to pieces those who fall on it and crushes those upon whom it falls. I struggle with the violent imagery but think it points to the invincible redemptive force the cross has set loose in the world (a topic for another day).

Suddenly they realize this has all been about them. They are the tenants who throw out and kill the landowner's son and in so harshly condemning those who did it, they condemned themselves. They want to immediately arrest Jesus but can't because they fear the crowds. Their time will come later in the week.

And now I have a question for you. Does God treat ungrateful, rebellious tenants the way the religious leaders say they should be treated? No! God does not act like a dishonored landowner in a fit of rage. Even the murder of his son did not provoke in him a reaction of vengeful retribution, but, instead he sent the risen one back with the message "Peace be with you!" Amen.