**Open for Interpretation**

A mediation on Matthew 21: 33 – 46 and Isaiah 5: 1 – 7

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Sometimes I worry about our friend, the gospel writer, Matthew. His interpretation of the life and teachings of Jesus is so beloved that he gets first place in the New Testament canon, but when we look closely, he seems to write with an intensity that is a bit over the top. Take today’s parable, which can be found in Mark, Luke and the Gospel of Thomas. The bloodshed in Matthew’s version seems unnecessarily extreme. Take a look at the two versions of the parable of the great banquet – remember the one in which a wealthy person plans a party, but none of the guests choose to come? The host invites all kinds of people with whom they would not have normally socialized, and everyone has a wonderful time! Except not in Matthew’s version. Matthew has someone show up in the wrong clothes and they are tied up and thrown out into the night. I do believe Matthew could benefit from a little…a lot…of therapy.

But what do we do with this parable, whether we read it in Matthew, Mark, Luke or Thomas? It’s a painful story, and it has been employed in horrifically discriminatory ways throughout history. Let’s examine its context and the possible interpretations from both Matthew’s and Jesus’ perspectives, since those seem to profoundly part ways.

In Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus tells this parable as part of a series of teachings. Jesus has just ridden into Jerusalem on a donkey, a farewell parade as he nears the end of his journey on this earth. He has upset the tables of the moneychangers and been confronted by the religious leaders about his authority. Into that atmosphere, Jesus tells this story. And Matthew, retells this story to a worshiping community in the aftermath of the Temple’s destruction. He retells this story as a Jewish person, speaking to Jewish people, about their community’s leadership. It would be similar to Presbyterians calling out Presbyterian pastors for failing to uphold the Gospel. Matthew is not setting up a Christians against Jews dynamic here, but that is exactly how this text has been misappropriated.

We can see how it would happen. In Matthew’s interpretation of the parable, the vineyard is the Temple (an ancient symbol), the messengers are the prophets throughout history who were disregarded - even killed, and the “son” and “heir” is Jesus, whom they also kill. Knowing that Jesus was speaking to the religious leaders, Matthew takes that message and uses it as a warning to the early believers, as a call to repentance. It would never have been Matthew’s intent to set loose a firestorm of hatred and discrimination against Jewish people, but this text and so many others have been interpreted as permission to destroy the “Christ-killers.”

We must denounce all such uses of this story. Jesus clearly called out the religious leaders of his day; he called them to renewal. He called them to re-examine law through the lens of compassion and mercy. It is what we are all called to do: to continually challenge ourselves, to continually challenge our leaders, civil, religious, political to a higher standard, to a deeper truth. But he did more than that, didn’t he? He also challenged their authority. He challenged the system itself, and that was terrifying. Much as our community comes unglued over the thought of recreating the police, unable to imagine that there could be a better, safer way for all people, they came unglued over Jesus’ critiques of their authority.

Let us say it again: we must denounce anti-Semitic uses of this text and all others in the New Testament. How dare we say this story is a condemnation of the Jewish people? If we are to contemporize this particular approach to the text, then it is a path to ask painful questions about how we live as a community of faith. Messengers have come to us. Messengers have come to us as we work in God’s vineyard. They have come to us time and time again and we have destroyed them time and time again. And every time we participate in systems that discriminate, that exclude, that abuse, we crucify Jesus all over again. We kill the son again.

So let us never, never turn this text against the Jewish people. Matthew didn’t use it against them; he used it *with* them – a Jewish person speaking to other Jewish people. A wake up call. As Whitney Bodman writes, this story is a “rejection of transgressive authority, equally applicable to the political sphere, then and now, and to the church, then and now.”[[1]](#endnote-1)

So, we have one option for how to explore this parable given Matthew’s context and intention. And we have a way to use that lens within our own community. That is one option. There are others, and they may be truer to Jesus’ concerns. Frankly, I’m not comfortable with the identification of the son as Jesus for one very important reason: death does not get the final word over God’s son. We never leave Jesus in death’s grip. Especially to a post-resurrection community. But then many parables have an essence of incompleteness, of “what next?”

Jesus gave us parables that are hopeful, comforting – like the lost and found parables. A lost coin, a lost sheep, a lost son (or sons?) But even in the midst of all that recovery, there is mystery. A woman loses a coin, finds it and then wastes it on a party, in effect, losing it again? One missing sheep is found, but in the meantime the other 99 have been left to fend for themselves? One son is restored to his father, but another son is lost? Parables are almost always dangerous and risky. They are rarely clean and simple. Jesus was dangerous, and risky, rarely clean and simple. He himself, writes Rev. Cynthia Jarvis, was a parable.[[2]](#endnote-2)

Let’s take another look, and as we do, let’s set aside the first interpretation, the easily drawn connections. Let’s look again at how Jesus frames this parable, as he does in good Jewish tradition. He opens with the allusion to the vineyard passage from Isaiah 5 and closes with a reference to the rejected cornerstone from Psalm 118. The love song to the vineyard ends in dismay, with the gardener taking down all the protections since it only produced bitter, diseased grapes. And what is the complaint? Again, in keeping with tradition, if the vineyard is the place of worship, the place where God dwells, then we recognize God’s despair when instead of justice, there was bloodshed, and instead of righteousness, there was only crying.

There is much crying within the parable. There is much bloodshed in Matthew’s version. Jesus, we know, told stories of familiar, everyday experiences. He spoke of sowing seeds and tending sheep. He spoke of building houses on the right foundations. Here he paints a picture that would have been all too familiar, possibly even to the extent of the violence. In a world in which owning land was everything (has anything changed, really? Home ownership is still the goal of many), losing the land meant tragedy. Imagine self-sufficient small farmers experiencing a bad year and losing their land to the wealthy farmer down the road. The wealthy farmer then hires the previous owners to work the land as tenant farmers. Did the farmers agree to the terms? Probably so. Would the terms have made it possible for them to put food on their tables? Maybe…What choice would the small farmers have had but to sell out, to lose the only heritage they had to pass on to their children.

Jesus is telling a true-life story. This is a story that his listeners know well. Who knows but that he may have been narrating an actual event. This story is messy and painful. There is horrific bloodshed and endless crying. The tenants cry over the land they lost. Their families cry from hunger. The messengers’ families cry over the loss of the innocents. They were just messengers caught in the system. The landowners cry over the death of their son. Was the son an innocent, too? Had he simply allowed himself to be unaware of the suffering caused by his family’s choices? Needless death, wasted tears. A broken community in which desperation’s energy is channeled into carnage. We cannot condone the violence perpetrated by the tenant farmers, but neither can we condone the violence perpetrated by the greed of the wealthy. And so we ask ourselves, “Where am I in this parable? What role do I play?”

In an encyclical on the theme of human fraternity released today by the Vatican, Pope Francis declares that:

*the COVID-19 pandemic was the latest crisis to prove that market forces alone and "trickle-down" economic policies had failed to produce the social benefits their proponents claim.” The 2007-2008 financial crisis was a missed opportunity for change, instead producing "increased freedom for the truly powerful, who always find a way to escape unscathed". Society must confront "the destructive effects of the empire of money".[[3]](#endnote-3)*

Makes us wonder if Pope Francis has been reading Matthew 21: 33 – 46.

For all the violence in Matthew’s version, Jesus doesn’t pronounce the revenge against the farmers. He lets his audience do that. In Matthew’s version, Jesus doesn’t perpetuate a cycle of on-going violence. That’s something to unsettle us as well. He doesn’t have the owner retaliate, but rather he offers them words from Psalm 118. The stone that was rejected has become the cornerstone. If Jesus is the cornerstone, as we proclaim, then that cornerstone is one of abundance for all, forgiveness for all, dignity for all. Are these the things that trip us up and cause us to stumble? When will we learn? How will we learn? If we withhold God’s grace from others, God’s shalom, we will all be left broken upon the stone. There is a better way. Let us look to that. Let us seek that together.

Amen and amen.

1. Bodman, Whitney. *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship*, Vol 3. Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, 2020. p. 368 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Jarvis, Cynthia. *Feasting on the Word: The Gospel of Matthew*, Vol 2. Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, 2013, p. 180. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. <https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/world/pope-says-free-market-trickle-down-policies-fail-society/ar-BB19GA2J?ocid=msedgntp>, Reporting by Philip Pullella; Editing by Giles Elgood [↑](#endnote-ref-3)