

Sermon—Proper 22, Year A, 2014
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Today we come up against the parable of the wicked tenants. These tenants are tasked with tending the master's vineyard and when the master sends a slave to collect his produce, the tenants, in their greed, beat one slave, kill another, and stone another. The master decides to send his son because surely the tenants will respect his son but upon the son's arrival in the vineyard, he is promptly killed. This is clearly an allegory. The master is God, the vineyard is Israel, the slaves are the prophets and martyrs, and Jesus is the son. Who are the wicked tenants? It has been suggested that they are the religious leaders or members of the established religious order. Perhaps they are members of secular society, maybe they are members of the church, or maybe they are politicians. The tenants are a little bit trickier to identify because, let's face it, who wants to be the wicked tenants in the story?

Regardless of who is in the tenant position, we can take two truths from today's story: first, we should be aware that people, including religious leaders, will attempt to impede the reign of Christ and two, the tenants of the vineyard did not kill an idea or creed or moral code; they killed a person. Therefore, the heart of faith is relationship and if we are looking for people who are trying to prevent the reign of Christ, we are looking for people who are trying to prevent the connections between people.

Human history is full of person to person devastation. We somehow have this incredible ability to separate each other into groups and when we identify someone as "other," we somehow give ourselves permission to hurt them or, at the very least, not acknowledge them. You all know the stories—Hitler ushered in the

Holocaust, killing millions of innocent people. In the United States, we participated in slavery for 246 years. The group calling themselves ISIS seems to be merciless in their pursuit of an Islamic state, and there are girls being kidnapped in Africa and sold into slavery in response to the education of women.

It happens on smaller levels than that too—levels that affect our daily lives. My little sister, who happens to be gay, was having a drink with a friend and minding her own business in Clemson, SC when a group of three woman came over, beat her up, and tore her cross necklace from her neck and told her, “you don’t deserve to wear this.” When she looked at the bar tender for help, he promptly threw HER out. “You don’t belong” was their message to Page. “You don’t deserve to live” was the message sent to the Jews in Germany during WWII. “You don’t count” was the message sent to the slaves in America for over 200 years. “You cannot reign here, the harvest is ours for the taking” was the message sent to Jesus Christ in every situation. And in all of those situations, God was victorious. The Nazi’s were defeated, slavery was abolished, and my little sister is *still* sitting in church today.

Do you know why? Because it says in our scriptures today that kingdom of God will be taken from those who reject the stone—the stone that is Jesus Christ. The stone that is love—love without conditions. God does not mince his words this morning. “The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls.” That’s right, friends. We do not serve a soft God. We do not serve an unjust God. We serve a God who says, “it is not acceptable that you stand in the way of my reign here on Earth.” “It will not be good for you if you come between me and my beloved.”

The harsh words for today's scripture that at first frightened me, now feel like salve on a wound. This is not so much a warning as it is a victory cry from our God. Though you might be suffering, the suffering will not win, God will win in the end... every. Single. Time.

Now, don't get me wrong. I'm not trying to trivialize suffering and I'm not one of those people that believe everything happens for a reason. I do not believe that God made millions of innocent Jewish people endure the holocaust so that the rest of us could learn not be racist and prejudice. I do not believe that my brother has schizophrenia so that my mom could learn to be patient and trust God. But I do believe that when the brokenness of the world enters our lives in ways that transforms everything we know for the worst, God has the power to redeem that newly transformed, painful life into one of love and purpose and peace. Why do I believe that? Because today's scripture reminds us that in end, God will be victorious. Good, not evil will prevail.

Here is the best part of today's Gospel: God does not ask for us to be responsible for this victory. We are not the ones with the burden of saving the world. God deals with the wicked tenants alone. This is a lesson that I learned very recently.

To better understand, you'll need some background: one of the best parts about being a priest is that I regularly get invited into the most intimate moments of other people's lives—whether or not I know the person well. A lot of the time, these intimate moments are sad or tragic—the death of a loved one, a divorce, abuse, or depression. Sometimes the moments are celebratory: weddings, births, baptisms, house blessings etc. but the sad moments seem to be just as holy, if not more, as the happy moments and it's tempting, as a human being, to feel a great sense of

personal importance at being invited into these moments. If you've ever met a priest or religious leader with a bit of an inflated ego, perhaps you could have some mercy on them as their job regularly thrusts them into situations where they get to be the visual representative of God—and it's a little heady if I'm honest with you.

The flip side of this however, is that when my humanity becomes apparent, it's a big fall from the sensation of being God-like. I imagine this is the kind of fall that could make the tenants wicked. But this happened to me last Sunday. I was driving to church early in the morning so that I could do the 8am service and just as I was about to pass The Varsity, I noticed a man sitting at the top of the fence on the bridge over I-85. There was a paramedic and an EMT talking to him and I knew what was happening—this man was going to kill himself. I pulled over and offered my assistance to the paramedic and he asked the man if he wanted to speak to a minister and the man said yes. So I got out of the car and began talking to this man.

It turned out that he was suffering from schizophrenia (the same illness that afflicts my little brother) and was using drugs to self-medicate because he couldn't afford the medicine. He was tired of the cycle and he couldn't see a way out. We talked for a little bit and eventually I asked him if he would come down so I could hold his hand. He paused for a long time and then he quickly tied the shoe strings that hung around his neck to the bridge and jumped off on our side. The paramedic quickly jumped about half way up the bridge, holding onto the fence, to catch the weight of the man and I held up his legs as best I could. The EMT climbed the fence and cut him down and the man lived that morning.

As you can imagine, I was pretty shaken up and when I walked into church with only 5 minutes before the service I told Geoffrey that I really needed a few minutes

to talk with him. I explained what happened and how horrible I felt. After all, I was the one talking to the man... and he jumped off the bridge. Father Hoare, in an incredible show of love and mercy somehow managed to provide space for me in that 5 minutes and in a very calm but serious tone, told me that the job of savior had already been fulfilled. He said, “you did not have the power to kill that man or save that man, you could only be present with him in his time of trouble.” And I have to tell you, I felt like sobbing. Yes, of course, the job of savior has already been fulfilled. Jesus Christ came into the world to save all of us. Our job is simply to be there for each other, to sit in the uncomfortable spaces that are tragedy and heartbreak and send the message: you are not alone. Our job is to be human beings who were created by love for love and to remember that deep in our bones. And thank God for that, thank God that none of us have the burden of being the savior. More than that, thank God there is a savior—one who is always present with us in our most vulnerable moments; in the moments where we need to be saved. Thank God that in the end, God is always victorious and it is not up to us to get people to see that, it’s our job to simply love and get out of his way.