

PATIENCE ABSURD

Matthew 21:33-46

A sermon given by Dr. Larry R. Hayward on the Twenty-seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time, World Communion Sunday, October 5, 2008, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia.

Focus Text

'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 watch-tower. 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.

Let us pray: *Lord, with all that is going on in our nation this week, we pray, with added zeal: "Come Holy Spirit, Heavenly Dove, come kindle the flame of sacred love, in these anxious hearts of ours." In the name of your Son we pray, whom we know and claim as Lord and Savior, even Jesus Christ. Amen.*

Last Sunday, when we looked at "The Parable of the Two Sons,"¹ I said that the parable raises issues about the relationships between Christians and Jews, but that I wanted to hold off on addressing that aspect of the parable for another day.

Today, as we turn to "The Parable of the Wicked Tenants," we find that issue again. I want to talk about it directly today, and then see what the parable might be saying to us as people of faith in 2008.

I.

Even if we have never before heard this parable, it is likely familiar because, over time, we have absorbed its structure into our consciousness as an allegory of God's relationship with his people, the Jews.

- The landowner, we say, represents God, who carefully created the world, represented by the vineyard.
- The tenants, we say, represent God's people, Israel, the Jews, chosen by God to receive his covenant and to exercise responsibility for his world.
- The slaves, we say, represent the prophets, those Biblical figures from Elijah to John the Baptist, whom God sent to lead the Jewish people to repentance and yet whom the Jews rejected and sometimes put to death.
- And the son, we say, represents Christ, sent as God's ultimate attempt to reach his people, but, like the prophets, rejected and killed.

¹ Larry R. Hayward, "Two Hearts/Two Minds," a sermon preached at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia, 9/28/08, available at www/wpc-alex.org.

As this parable seeps into our consciousness, it both forms and affirms what most of us have always assumed: that God chose the Jewish people to be the bearers of his covenant but that because they did not accept Jesus as the promised Messiah, God transferred the covenant to us.

So deeply embedded is this belief within us that not even the incendiary language we encounter in the parable – terms like “wicked tenants” in the title and sentences like “He will put those wretches to a miserable death” – cause us to wince. In the end, we say, we Christians are right, and the Jews are tragically wrong. Parable over. Case closed.

III.

Is there a way *within the parable* of seeing it as something other than a blueprint for Christians replacing Jews as custodians of the promises of God?

I believe there is. Follow me closely.

Jesus tells this parable to religious leaders.

- These religious leaders are Jewish – chief priests and Pharisees.
- Jesus is Jewish.
- Matthew’s church, community, audience and milieu are Jewish.

After telling the parable to Jewish religious leaders, the Jewish Jesus asks them what they think will happen to the Jewish tenants in the parable who refuse to heed both the Jewish slaves and the Jewish son. The religious leaders say that the landowner will return, kill the tenants, and turn the vineyard over to new tenants who will produce good fruit.

This parable depicts an intense religious conflict between two different parties within Judaism, one represented by Jesus, the other represented by the religious leaders and the tenants.

- It is not a passage about Christians replacing Jews because Jews have failed.
- It is a passage about one set of Jews in conflict with another set of Jews.

It is like the rhetoric we find in primary elections: Candidates from the same party rake each other over the coals, often with inflammatory rhetoric. To take what one candidate says about another in a primary race and use it in the general election makes for good ad copy and increased voter turnout, but rarely does it speak to the context or truth of the comments.

Thus, for us to take this parable and assume that Judaism as a religion – or even more so as a race – has been rejected by God because Jews do not recognize Jesus as the Messiah is to take a moment in the parable and elevate it to a faulty blueprint for the relationship between Jews and Christians for all time. That is simply not what this parable is about.

IV.

So what is it about? How are we to use it? I think we are to take our cue from the last line of the passage, a line supplied by Matthew: “When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they realized he was speaking *about them*.”

This line invites us to identify not with landowner, the protagonist in the story, and not with the slaves, the victims in the story, but with the original hearers of the parable, the religious leaders,² the possessors of the promises of God.

Once we put ourselves in the place of the religious leaders, we realize that the indictment they receive for being like tenants and not recognizing voices from God coming to them through the slaves, may be an indictment we too need to hear.

- Like the religious leaders and tenants, we have been given responsibility for bearing fruit for the world.
- Perhaps like both, we have come to believe that we are so in possession of the truth that we do not need to hear other voices suggesting other ways.
- Like the tenants and religious leaders, when we hear messengers, voices, prophets God is sending to keep us alive and awake to God’s activity in the world, we often ignore or silence them, rather than recognize them as bearers of the voice of God.

² See Thomas G. Long, *Matthew* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1993), 248.

When we assume the role of religious leaders listening to the parable, we soon realize that *the parable is speaking to our unwillingness to listen to new voices rather than to a prior understanding we may have that we have replaced the Jews because they dropped the ball.*

V.

Hearing the parable this way naturally leads us to ask a whole new set of questions, centered around this one question: “Who might be the voices God is sending to speak to us today?”

- “Who might be the voices God is sending to speak to the most intimate aspects of our lives – personal, familial, emotional, spiritual, religious, vocational?”
- “Who might be the messengers God is sending to speak to how we acquire and spend our money, how we allocate our time, how we decide what activities our children will pursue and what they will by-pass so as to learn to rely on their own imagination and companions for play?”
- Are the messengers being sent today the voices who have been warning us about unbridled greed in our nation, greed now exposed, greed that has fought or bypassed appropriate regulation, greed that has manipulated data, greed that has put us in the terrible mess we are in?
- Are the messengers being sent today the voices who have been warning that we have made borrowing too easy and credit standards too lax, that the American dream of home ownership may simply not be available to everyone if for no other reason than not all have the financial wherewithal or emotional acumen to purchase a home?”
- Are the messengers being sent today the voices of many Christians around the world whose faith is formed in persecution and poverty and marked by prayer, fellowship, sharing of goods, and intense devotion, voices that stand in prophetic and challenging contrast with the faith we struggle simply to maintain in the midst of our technologically-astute, culturally-sophisticated, yet often emotionally-bankrupt society, where production and consumption have replaced subsistence and survival as a way of life?
- Are the messengers God is sending today the voices that affirm that the life of the mind is at the heart of our faith, that the mind illumines the spirit and informs the work of our hands, so that the faith we carry into the world is wise with complexity and sophistication so as to serve the world rather than withdraw from it, seek sanctuary within it, or imitate its most shallow, bizarre, and unchallenging forms of narrative to provide temporary relief that amounts to nothing more than entertainment and escapism?
- Are the messengers God is sending today the voices that call America to play a more humble role in the world, to rebuild ourselves rather than seek to rebuild others, to repent of our mistakes, misdeeds, and unintended consequences?”
- Are the messengers God is sending today the voices that call us, even in light of recent difficulties, to engage the world, through diplomacy, aid, education, travel, and military means, to fight for freedom, democracy, justice, human rights, self-development, and protection from genocide – no matter how tough times are feel at home, no matter how wounded our pride might be?”

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Friends, most of us are wise enough to know that each of these voices speaks only part of the truth, that none contains all of the truth, and that none is entirely unreasonable. Many of us are religious enough to believe that even voices as secular as these may indeed bear the stamp of God.

As is the case with the religious leaders to whom Jesus told “The Parable of the Wicked Tenants,” it is sometimes the voices we *think* are speaking the truth that in fact have lulled us into complacency or smugness, and the voices we are most likely to *ignore or silence* that are the voices sent by God to speak to us in our day.

VI.

The incredibly good news in this parable – which I save for the end – is that no matter how well or poorly the tenants listen to the voices the landowner sends, the landowner keeps sending, keeps sending, keeps sending, even sends his own son. The landowner is willing to endure a death in his family that the tenants might have life in theirs.

Remember, good people: This parable is an allegory; the landowner represents God. The patience displayed by the landowner is the patience God displays toward us. It is the patience that keeps sending voices until we hear and respond. It is enormous patience. Patience absurd.³

So my charge to us all – myself included – is this:

Listen.
Listen well to *all* the voices around us.
Be wary of the impulse to ignore any particular voice,
For in the end,
The voice we ignore may be
The precise voice
Sent by God to call us
To do things differently than we have been doing them
For a long time.
Amen.

³ This title comes from David Buttrick, *Speaking in Parables: A Homiletic Guide*, (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2000), 78; quoted in Cynthia Campbell's paper for The Moveable Feast Preaching Seminar on this passage, January 2008.