

## 20141005SeventeenthAfterPentecostSermon

### Wine Presses and Watchtowers...

I can just imagine the advert: *To Let, Vineyard with all mod cons from Wine Press to Watchtower. Previous tenants departed suddenly. All applications welcome.* Today's Gospel is a parable about a vineyard, its owner and its tenants. It is another one of those parables that makes you feel slightly uncomfortable. Surely Jesus can't be saying I'm like one of those "wicked tenants"?

Well, that is what makes Biblical interpretation so interesting. You see, many interpreters say that Jesus was referring to the Jews as the "wicked tenants" and since they didn't give God what God wanted, the whole vineyard and all its fittings and fixtures has been left in the hands of us "capable Christians...". I'm not sure if any of you interpret the parable this way and I won't embarrass any of you by asking. Others say that the wicked tenants are all of humankind - including Christians. And we had better watch out because God wants us to produce and give back, or else God will remove us and turn things over to someone more capable and trustworthy...

Still others put a political and perhaps liberation theological interpretation on it and say that the landowner should never be understood as God but rather that the landowner represents the oppressive forces in Jesus day, including the Pharisees, who were misusing power. Using this interpretation, the hearers of Jesus would have said that the tenants had every right to stand up for themselves and kill the slaves who were sent to collect the wicked landlord's harvest thus obtaining liberation in the here and now and not just after they die and go to heaven.

There is a problem with this interpretation. You see, Jesus is not talking to oppressed people. He is having a conversation with the Pharisees. Earlier in the chapter and in last weeks Gospel they questioned his authority- *by what authority do you say these things, and who has given it to you?* And Jesus turned the tables on them twice- first with a question about John the Baptist, *Was his power from heaven or earth? We don't know,* was the Pharisees response. And Jesus tells them *"Then I won't tell you by whose authority is it that I say these things."* Second, Jesus poses a riddle about two sons asked to do work for their father- one son refuses, but goes to do the work anyway, and one says "Yes!" but then doesn't go. *Which one did the right thing?* Jesus asks...Although the Pharisees say, the first one they do so, as I said, through clenched teeth because they knew where Jesus was going. So Jesus then gives them this third story, this parable, this riddle....

I think it is important for us to form our own interpretation of the parable: Jesus begins... 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.

So, the parable takes place in a vineyard. Similar to the story of two brothers, a vineyard has more meaning to Jesus' hearers than just been a piece of land with vines on it. From the Old Testament, we hear over and over again, that God's vineyard is Israel- not the land- the people... God's people are the vineyard. So from the beginning of the parable, we know that there has been care and planning on the part of the owner (God) to make sure the vineyard (the people of God) have everything they need to make this thing work. He has planted vines, put up a fence, or wall around it and dug a wine press in it. So everything to be productive is there. He even built a watchtower for security.

At harvest time the landowner sends messengers to collect from the tenants. But the tenants are opposed to giving up anything. We aren't told why- we are only told they don't want to hand over the harvest to the landowner. Instead they beat, kill and stone the messengers.

Now this is where the story starts to sound a bit unreal to us. Imagine that you're the landowner. Your slaves have just been killed by out of control tenants... what would you do? Would you send in another group of messengers to try it again? I sort of doubt it. Perhaps we would send some guys with balaclavas and AK47! Remember too that the owner was wealthy enough to hire an army... why send in a second group of slaves for the same thing to happen to them?

Yet that's what the owner does. And when they are also killed... the owner sends in his son... and adds these words..."Surely they will respect him." Wow, such faith in the decency humankind!

Now, for Jesus' immediate hearers the only reason the son of a landowner would come to the property instead of the landowner, would be because the landowner was dead. So the tenants, seeing the son, say- "Hey, here's the heir- if we kill him, we get everything for ourselves"; and so the son is killed as well.

This is where Jesus ends his parable. But then he shifts from storytelling and he asks "What do you think will happen when the owner comes back?" And the Pharisees give him the answer that makes sense to them- and frankly, makes a lot of sense to us too..."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." And we all expect Jesus to say "YES! That's exactly what happens!" But he doesn't. Instead, Jesus says, *Haven't you read that part in the scriptures where it says: '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- *The stone the builders rejected...* the son is rejected but God doesn't exact vengeance- God gives out mercy. God doesn't smite and kill and give what the wicked tenants deserve- God gives love. Through the death of his son, God will give eternal life. God doesn't act like you Pharisees are telling people God will act if they don't fall in line. God doesn't act like you or I would act when people hurt or reject us... God acts like God.

And Jesus goes on.... *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.* In other words, [because you (Pharisees) have perceived God in **your** image, because you have made God into a being who acts like human beings act- you'll never be able to live out life in the vineyard]. Let me read that again... Jesus goes on: And the stone who is meant to be your foundational rock, you'll continue to stumble on. You, Pharisees, have made God out to be the oppressive landowner- as oppressive and exclusive as you are...

You see this parable isn't as much about who gets what they deserve as it is about who is being judge over others. (Which is exactly what the Pharisees were doing) And we here this morning might be doing the same... This Parable highlights our propensity to judge - to cast a sentence- to want justice exacted on those who deserve it in our eyes.

Jesus is saying, it's not up to us to judge other people. It's not up to us to decide who gets forgiven and who doesn't- and make up your own interpretation on the laws and limits of God's love. God planted the field, God set up the fence, God knows the boundaries... not us (thank God!)

Yet, when it seems so clear cut to us who is guilty and why they are guilty, we are more than ready to bring down the hand of judgment on someone... when we see someone behaving in a way we think is wrong we want them punished, especially when we've been hurt.

The issue is that God sees something beyond what we can fathom. God understands more than we can comprehend. God's ways are not our ways... God loves and forgives and cares for **all of us** beyond our reason... and because of our reluctance to embrace that... we miss out. We lose our participation in the making of peace and the building of love process that we could be enjoying. The richness of Kingdom life that we could be living out is taken from us.

Now maybe you are saying to yourselves, "I want to understand. I yearn to forgive and love unconditionally." Do you really? Because when you do that, that means you give up your right to hold grudges... and you give up the fun of talking about people behind their back... no more off-colour jokes about how fat she is, or how wrong he was or how much "they" messed up... and, also no more making another person's life miserable just because they said or did something way back that annoyed you.

With all that "fun" taken from your life, how do you live then? How do we function on a day to day basis, and figure out how to love each other as God would have us do? Let's go back to the first verse of this parable again... within this beautiful vineyard God has given us to tend, there is a wine-press – it is a means of production. Now, an early wine press looked like a big shallow pit... "The top side of the wine press has a steep rectangular floor where the grapes were arranged. The workers squashed the grapes with their feet, and the juice would flow down to the lower side... into a collecting basin. As a filter, these holes were filled with a collection of thorns or brushwood. On both sides of this pit there are two vertical holes, where poles were held by the workers during the pressing over the grapes, providing shadow for the comfort of the workers."

The work was tiresome, hot, and messy. Sounds kind of like doing work for the Church, doesn't it? God has provided a whole system to make it all work. Some stomp grapes, and some spread thorns, and some clean filters, some even hold a pole providing shade and coolness and relief! And I know sometimes we get to thinking that the whole thing is just all too much! Some of us think "I haven't lived up to what God wants of me; all I've done is sit in the shade" or "I feel like all I do is stomp grapes when others just stand on the sidelines doing nothing" or maybe even "I'm not qualified to do anything in the vineyard and I'm sure I'll be found out eventually...". Stop Judging yourself! Let God be God! And secondly, Go back to the beginning of the passage one more time. Along with planting the vineyard and putting up the fence and digging out the wine press... God put a watchtower in the vineyard... God built-in a giant stronghold, visible from anywhere in the vineyard, from anywhere you are, to let you know you are secure! To remind you that you're safe in God's care. That you don't have to worry about being thrown out beyond the walls for not producing enough, or being resentful of others, or unsure of your gifts... From fences to watchtowers, God's got it covered. Are you willing to rent this vineyard with all mod. cons.? Are willing to become the new tenants?

*Based on ideas from <http://www.theologicalstew.com/fences-to-watchtowers.html>*