

For the people of St Philip's  
Luke 20: 9-19  
March 25, 2007  
Lent V Year C  
Maria Hoecker, preacher

Here we go again. Another one of those convoluted parables of life with Jesus....

Whenever I smack up against a parable, I bounce along the surface for awhile and then hope for grace to give me some insight. To get there, I like to try to look at the culture as we know it at the time of Jesus. So let's do that this morning. I think it is time well-spent because Jesus uses this parable to tell a deeper story. He's telling those who might listen a story behind a story. Let's go a little deeper into it by first reading the story at the surface.

Jesus often used agriculture images when he tried to make the mysterious more familiar. A few weeks ago, we heard about fig trees. Today it's a vineyard where grapes are grown. The whole act of planting a vineyard was an act of faith for the landowner. It used untried soil, and involved great expense. You had to build a winepress and a watchtower. It would take four years of cultivation before the vines began to bear grapes. It was definitely a long-term venture.

The landowner would support the hired tenant farmers, buy manure and supplies, hoping that in the fifth year he might turn a profit. While the vineyard was being cultivated, the landowner would probably not be in close contact. In this case, he disappeared for a few years.

Then the servant shows up to receive the income from the vineyard. The landowner wasn't even asking for a lot: just a sample of the fruit. But it didn't go well at all. We don't know why there was such hostility; the tenants probably thought they should own the land. Things continued to escalate.

This story is also included in two other Gospels. In Mark's account, more servants were sent, and some of them were even killed. The message: the tenants had no intention of paying the income from the harvest. They were claiming possession of the crop.

So the question is: What would you have done were you that landowner? Now keep in mind that this is an allegory, which takes the story a little deeper. God is the landowner. Jesus is the son. The tenants are the religious authorities in Jerusalem who are about to kill Jesus. The slaves are the prophets of the Old Testament.

There are lots of options for the land owner. 1. The landowner could meet force with force. He could hire someone to kill the tenants.. 2. He could declare the contract null and void, as the farmers have done. But that's not what he did.

Instead the landowner thought, "The problem is that they think they're the rightful owners of the property by virtue of their work on the land. Surely, when they're confronted with somebody from my family, they'll recognize my authority and finally respect the agreement." He did the unimaginable: instead of meeting them with force or hostility, he sent his son.

It's possible that when the tenants saw the son coming, they guessed that the owner had died, and the son had taken his place. If that were the case, then little would stand in the way of full possession of the vineyard if the son was out of the way. They could say, "We haven't paid rent in years; the legitimate owner has died; we took care of the crops; it's all ours."

So the tenants kill the son and take his inheritance. But they don't kill him within the vineyard; they kill him outside, so that they don't soil the vineyard with his blood.

They made a terrible mistake. They had gone too far. Finally, the owner's patience runs out. Verse 15 says, "What do you suppose the owner of the vineyard will do to those farmers?" Jesus asked. "I'll tell you- he will come and kill them all and lease the vineyard to others."

The people to whom Jesus told this story immediately got the point. His listeners protested. "This is not a happy story. But the religious leaders got the point. "When the teachers of religious law and the leading priests heard this story, they wanted to arrest Jesus immediately because they realized he was pointing at them-that they were the farmers in the story."

So what's the story behind this story?

From the beginning of creation, God's desire has always been to be in relationship with us as people. If you read the Bible, from Genesis 3 on, it's the story of us resisting God and fighting him. Even today: our lives are generally in opposition to God.

But God didn't leave us alone. The Bible is full of stories of God sending his servants - prophets, teachers, leaders - to his people, so that his relationship with us could be restored.

Here's the Bible in a nutshell: God reaches out, we reject him, God reaches out again. Next chapter: God reaches out, we reject him, God reaches out again. That's a pretty good summary of the Bible from Genesis 3 to the end of the Old Testament. It's our pattern

time after time. And yet God continues to reach out, he continues to send his servants and his prophets.

How were the prophets received? Not too well. They were stoned, killed by sword, put in stocks, beheaded. They were sawn in half. Tradition says that most prophets ended up being killed. If God picked you to be a prophet, you'd pretty well know how it was going to end up.

Time after time, God reaches out, and time after time, we reject him. And how does God react to this continual rejection? Not by breaking the relationship with us. Not by meeting force with force. He responds by sending his Son - his only Son

In this parable as the landowner, God said, "Nothing else has worked. I'm not ready to give up yet. Maybe they'll listen to my Son. Maybe they'll recognize his authority."

God said, "Even though they've rejected me, I'll send my Son -that which is most precious and unique to me - so that I can have a relationship with them." God knew Jesus would face rejection and death, but God sent his son anyway.

There's another verse that fleshes this out some more. In the 1<sup>st</sup> letter of John it says, "*This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.*"

So let's wake up, gang. Let's take heed. There's a warning today for us. What's our past track record for receiving God's gifts? It's lousy. Remember in the time of Jesus it was the religious who gave him the most grief. It probably still is. We don't receive God's servants and prophets very well. We have a long history of rejecting them and killing them. It's our history as God's people.

Jesus gives us all a stern warning in this Gospel reading. The stone that the builders have rejected not only becomes the cornerstone of a new building, but it also fractures and crushes people. In the verses to follow, Jesus predicts to the chief priests and scribes that the temple will be destroyed. Life as they know it will come to an end. Luke knows that this all will come to pass, and so it is written. A new building will emerge from the rubble. A building with no walls to contain it. Jesus will smash the box in which the religious attempt to confine him. He will be the chief cornerstone for a new creation.

God sent servants and prophets. God sent us God's most beloved best. There's no one left to send after Jesus; there's nothing better to give. This is it. We hear it every week. We taste and see it every time we come to the Table. We look for it in each other. Jesus is the Word made flesh. The Word of God is one of the most powerful tools in any Christian's life. Like the sharp blade of a knife, the story behind the stories, the Word made flesh cuts through us, not to destroy us, but ... to heal us.