

Sermon: Cornerstone

New North Church, Hingham

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Based on **Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20; Matthew 21:33-46**

A while ago, someone on social media posted a photo of a whiteboard with the heading: This Year I Want to Be More Like Jesus. On the whiteboard were listed some ways in which the person could do this: Hang out with sinners; Upset religious people; Tell stories that make people think; Choose unpopular friends; Be kind, loving, and merciful; Take naps on boats.

Today, Jesus upset religious people – in this case, chief priests and Pharisees – by telling a story designed to make people think.

Why did Jesus tell parables, anyway? Because they help us ask the right questions about living in community and in determining what really matters.

And they are a good teaching tool. Parables don't necessarily give us answers, but they do invite us to open up to new possibilities. They challenge us in ways that direct speech might not, and they are memorable in a world that relied on an oral tradition of storytelling.

Also, Jesus doesn't seem to mind provoking people, and these particular parables do a good job of that.

This is the second of three parables Jesus tells in the Temple. Last week, we heard the parable of the two sons. Next up is the parable of the wedding banquet. All three parables are about judgement and about how God rejects those who reject God and God's salvation. And as they get more and more violent, these parables reflect the mounting tension between Jesus and the religious authorities. They are pretty gritty stories to say the least.

If he hadn't called it a parable, this could be a simple story about a peasant revolt against an absentee landlord, but where's the lesson in that? Would that be enough to irritate the chief priests and Pharisees to the point where they want to arrest Jesus?

Nah. Instead, this parable can be read as an allegory, where we are free to wonder who each character is in the story. Who is the absentee landlord? Could be God. Jesus borrowed the beginning of his story from Isaiah 5, in which the vineyard is Israel, so we can imagine that's what it meant to him too. The first batch of slaves could be the ancient prophets of Israel, and the second batch could be early Christ followers.

Later Christians read the parable with Jesus as the Son, but Jesus himself may not have thought of it that way. And the tenants – who might they be? One way to resolve that question is to ask, who is Jesus in conflict with? Whoever that is, those are the tenants. From the chief priests' and Pharisees' reaction, it's probable that Jesus meant them, but did they really hear what Jesus said?

When Jesus asks them what they think should be done with the tenants, their answer shows a complete lack of empathy; they seem to be okay with answering violence with violence. Then Jesus quotes from Psalm 118, in which the stone refers to God's instruction in the commandments.¹ If God can take a rejected stone and make it into the cornerstone, then God can quite easily take the kingdom away from you, chief priests and Pharisees, and give it to other, more obedient and faithful tenants.

How did it get like this?

Throughout human history, people have always found ways to reject God, even when they say otherwise. In wartime, we demonize people to make them our enemy and to avoid the stigma and guilt in violating the commandment against murder. We call those who don't belong to our ethnic or political tribe the 'other.' We can be as brutal to the 'other' as were the tenants who beat, stoned, and killed people in today's parable.

Slavery and segregation were a part of the American experience for almost four hundred years. In the 1800s, official government policy marginalized Native Americans and forced entire populations to move from their homelands to make way for the expansion of the nation. The Miami tribe, for one, got pushed out of Ohio into Indiana and Oklahoma. Germany devised a thing called the Holocaust in an attempt to remove their 'other' from view completely. The Soviet Union shipped their 'other' population to the gulag in Siberia. In our lifetimes, we have witnessed apartheid in South Africa and ethnic cleansing in the Balkans and Central Africa. India maintains a hidden population called the 'untouchables' and in Australia, aborigines still suffer from discrimination.

Theologian James Cone wrote in his book, *The Spirituals and the Blues*,² that ‘slavery contradicts God; it is a denial of God’s will.’ When we reject some of God’s people, we reject God. Until we accept all of God’s people, the rejected ones will be restless. There have always been iniquities built into the system and many remain in force today, and the fact that they still exist doesn’t make it right.

Matthew makes it clear that the problem is not with the vineyard but with the tenants. As a culture, broadly speaking, where do we stand? Are we the vineyard, as we ought to be, or do we more resemble the wicked tenants? Jesus forces us to make a decision when he asks, ‘What do you think?’

Jesus is concerned with relationships and how we care for each other. He’s concerned about how we arrange our priorities and whether we choose to live the way God wants us to live. The companion stories from Exodus that we’ve heard the past few weeks show us the same thing.

Then God spoke all these words and laid it out for us: people are meant to live in peaceful fellowship and here’s how you do it. The first five words have to do with our relationship with God, holiness, and honoring our parents, who raised us.

The next five have to do with how we interact with our neighbors, as do the next 603 commandments. And about that word *commandment*: some people just don’t like to be told what to do and the thought of obeying *commandments* makes their skin crawl.

SPREAD ANARCHY

Don’t Tell Me What to Do!

But, living according to God’s words –the basis of the divine covenant – makes for a peaceful, productive vineyard for everyone.

What hampered the chief priests and elders was the certainty of their world view. For them, God was a punitive god and the wicked needed retribution. The chief priests and elders had arrived at their own version of the truth and it didn’t include Jesus.

But, for God and Jesus, there is no gray area; there is no room to fudge the truth.

All the words God spoke enable us to live together in peace. The parable Jesus told exposed a corrupt human authority which had failed to produce the true fruits of the kingdom, which are justice and loving-kindness.

God has prepared and given to us everything we need to enter the kingdom without fear, to share in a new inheritance and to do it together in community, to love the Lord our God with all our heart and with all our soul and with all our mind and with all our strength, and our neighbors as ourselves. We only need to choose.

And when we choose God, we begin to see the world the way it really is. And then we can begin to see how we can help make it better. It all comes down to that.

Amen.

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¹ Matthew, Mark, Luke, Luke again in Acts, and Peter all refer to and quote from Psalm 118.

² James H. Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992), 33.