

Sermon: God Spoke

New North Church, Hingham

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

In the 1942 film classic, *Casablanca*, Victor Laszlo visits the jail and asks to speak with a man named Ugarte, who was arrested in Rick Blaine's Café Americain the night before. The villain, Major Heinrich Strasser, said, 'You would find the conversation a trifle one-sided. Señor Ugarte is dead.' Captain Renault, the prefect of police, added, 'I am making out the report now. We haven't quite decided yet whether he committed suicide or died trying to escape.'

And that is a bit like what we are being asked to do today, which is to decide for ourselves the truth about Jesus of Nazareth.

Today's parable, the second of three in a row, is a complicated allegory. In an allegory, you can substitute a symbolic character for a real one and arrive at a new interpretation of the truth. In this case, we often associate the landowner with God, the son with Jesus, and the tenants with the chief priests and elders.

Jesus said, 'Listen to another parable,' and he began by quoting the prophet Isaiah nearly verbatim, who said: 'My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill.

He dug it and cleared it of stones,
and planted it with choice vines;
he built a watch-tower in the midst of it,
and hewed out a wine vat in it;
he expected it to yield grapes,
but it yielded wild grapes.' (Isaiah 5:1b-2)

Vineyard is a standard metaphor for 'lover' in Israelite love poetry, and in Isaiah, the love is not returned in kind. But the parable as Jesus tells it reflects bad relations between the tenants and the landowner, which further reflects the reality of first-century Israel where landowners often pushed tenants off the land, or took over farms when the tenants fell into debt, which is one reason so many people had the time to follow Jesus.

When the tenants learn that the heir is coming, they decide to kill him and *get* his inheritance. What inheritance is that and how are they going to get it?

These tenants are peasants but they are also the heirs to the ancient Israelites who were originally given this land through Abraham's covenant with YHWH. Each family preserved their portion of the land as an inheritance for the next generation. They didn't trade it, sell it, or let it be stolen. Jeremiah once bought a field to prove there was a future for the people in Israel, but he bought it from his cousin, keeping it in the family.

So, one way we can interpret this parable is as a kind of peasant revolt, with a spiral of violence swirling around the conversion of farmland to a vineyard, an absentee landlord who takes but does not pay, and an attempt to regain a stolen inheritance. If this is an allegory, and it is, then it also puts God in a bad light.

But notice that Jesus doesn't say as much. It is the chief priests and elders who don't seem to know God very well when they assume the owner of the vineyard will seek retribution. They are the ones who think the landowner ought to 'put those *wretches* to a miserable death.' They have no empathy for tenants trapped in an exploitive economic situation; no connection with peasants who see open revolt as their only way to get back what was stolen from them.

At this point in the story, the chief priests and elders have not yet rejected Jesus as the heir, but they have endorsed an unjust system, and they seem to be okay with responding to violence with violence. Therefore, Jesus says, the kingdom of God will be taken away from them and given to those who produce the fruit – the kingdom of God becomes a new inheritance. Not until Jesus quotes from Psalm 118 do the chief priests and elders realize that he is talking about them, and *then* they reject him.

Psalm 118 celebrates the exodus from Egypt and was often read as part of the Passover celebration, which is happening now in Matthew's Gospel. Psalm 118 refers to the cornerstone as the sure foundation established by God in Israel, and they have rejected it. The chief priests and elders would recognize the implications immediately.

By pairing this reading with the reading of the Ten Commandments from Exodus, we're meant to see that God's laws are just and that people can be less so. God spoke all these words for a reason, even though the people haven't yet said that they would *obey* all that God told them. Moses said, 'Do not be afraid; it's for your own good.' But in the parable, the tenants broke several laws multiple times without even thinking about them,

and the chief priests and elders have no problem fighting fire with fire. Where is the good in this passage?

Remember the wider context from last week, when the chief priests and elders challenged Jesus to reveal the source of his authority to do all that he did in the Temple. Jesus, in return, challenged them to either reject him or accept him, and by extension, reject or accept God. [We're guessing they're leaning toward rejection, since now they want to arrest him.]

Jesus' authority derives from his identity as the Son of God, which he keeps secret throughout his ministry, but it keeps popping up throughout Matthew's Gospel. We the readers know all about it, but it is never publicly announced until after Jesus dies on the Cross.

In 2017, we know how the story goes, or we think we do. We've heard it before. But what if we had been there in the Temple, hidden by a column or a curtain, and we overheard Jesus tell this parable and the one from last week? What would we think was going on? Would we nod our heads and think, yeah, Son of God! Or would we reject him too? Would we also lose some respect for the chief priests and elders?

Maybe that's the hidden grace in this passage: it forces us to confront our own opinion about Jesus, or to form a new one. Maybe that's what's going on with the chief priests and elders – maybe they know the truth in their hearts but they just can't accept it.

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

Slavery and segregation were a part of the American experience for almost four hundred years. Official government policy marginalized Native Americans and forced entire populations to move from their homelands in order to make way for the expansion of the nation. Germany devised a thing we now call the Holocaust to remove the 'other' from view completely. The Soviet Union shipped their 'other' population to Siberia. In our lifetimes, we have witnessed apartheid in South Africa, 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 *The Spirituals and the Blues*,¹ that ‘slavery contradicts God; it is a denial of God’s will.’ When we reject some of God’s people, we reject God. That’s what it means when a church puts up a Black Lives Matter banner, that until we accept all of God’s people, the rejected ones will be restless. That’s what it means when an athlete takes a knee during the national anthem, to symbolically protest the iniquities built into the system. Jesus forces us to make a decision when he asks, ‘What do you think?’

When we turn to Jesus – the cornerstone of faith – he breaks down our prejudices, our suspicions and fears, and builds us back up again on a strong spiritual foundation. Through it all, the cornerstone remains secure and available for us to build on.

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

In *Casablanca*, the truth was, Ugarte was dead. How he got that way almost didn’t matter, as long as the official story held up under scrutiny. Captain Renault could afford to manipulate the truth to suit his purposes. For God and Jesus, there is no gray area; there is no room to fudge the truth.

The words God spoke enable us to live together in peace. The parables Jesus told exposed a corrupt human authority which had failed to produce the true fruits of the kingdom: justice and loving-kindness. God has prepared and given 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 our neighbors as ourselves.

Amen.

¹ James H. Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992), 33.