

A DIFFERENT KIND OF HARVEST  
Rev. Jason Santalucia

A sermon preached at Valley Presbyterian Church  
in Brookfield, Connecticut  
on October 8, 2023

Text: Matthew 21:33-46

"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 watchtower. 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.

"Listen to another parable," Jesus says at the beginning of today's reading, and before we get into it, let me say a little bit about parables in general.

Parables have a specific purpose. They're not just for entertainment. They're meant to overturn conventional ways of thinking. They take our assumptions about the way things work and turn them upside-down. So there's always that twist at the end—that "a-ha" moment when all of a sudden we see

something in a totally different light, and we realize, "Oh, I've been looking at this all wrong. I had it completely backwards."

When that happens, you can't just forget about it and go back to how you were living before. When your worldview changes, how you live in the world has to change with it. You have to adapt your behavior to fit this new understanding. You have to re-align your priorities. You

have to re-think your habits. You have to re-imagine your purpose.

Now, keep that in mind as we take a look at this reading.

The parable Jesus tells is usually called, "The Parable of the Wicked Tenants." It's about a group of tenant farmers, or sharecroppers—people who don't own the land they farm but instead rent it from somebody else. Tenant farming was a common thing in Jesus' day, and from an economic justice point-of-view, it was pretty terrible for the farmers. They did all the work, and when the harvest came, the landowners took most of the profits and left them with barely enough to survive. It was a system that kept people right on the edge of starvation their whole lives—never more than one bad harvest away from not being able to feed their families. And no one could do anything about it because the Romans kept everyone in line with the threat of violence.

That's the background, that's the historical context, and it's important because it puts everything in a very different light.

There was a landowner, Jesus starts out. He planted a vineyard, poured a lot of money and resources into it, and then rented it out. At harvest time, he sent some of his servants to collect the rent that was due. But the farmers who'd been working the land this whole time didn't want to hand over the bulk of their crops. Not because they were greedy, but because they knew they couldn't survive on what was leftover. So they grabbed the servants, beat them up and killed them. When the servants didn't come back, the landowner sent more servants, and the farmers killed them, too. Then finally he sent his son, thinking surely

they won't do anything to him. Surely they'll treat him with respect. But when the son showed up at the vineyard, the farmers did the same thing to him.

"Now," Jesus says to all the people standing there listening to him, "when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?" "He'll put them to death," they say, without even having to think about it. And the reason why they don't have to think about it is because nothing in this parable is the least bit surprising to them or seems the least bit unusual. This is the world they live in. This is the way things work.

So we don't hear them asking Jesus, "Why would these farmers do this? Why would they stage what amounts to an insurrection?" They don't need anyone to explain that to them. They know what tenant farming is, they know how terrible it is for the farmers, and they know this was an act of desperation. When you push people to the brink, this is what happens. Eventually they push back.

At the same time, they know perfectly well what the consequence is going to be. There's no question about it. The landowner is going to put them to death. Maybe not personally. He's not going to do it himself. He's going to go to local Roman authorities, and they're going to come and arrest the farmers. And then they're going to execute them. And they're going to do it in a very public way, using some horrible method like crucifixion. Because that's what the Romans do. They make sure everyone knows, "This is what happens when you cause trouble. This is what happens when you step out of line."

It's all so routine. It's all so predictable. When it rains, the ground gets wet. When the sun goes down, the

sky gets dark. I imagine the only thing people are wondering as they listen to parable is, "Why is Jesus telling us stuff we already know?"

But then comes the twist.

Everyone knows what's going to happen to these farmers. There's no doubt in anyone's mind. But instead of telling them they're right, Jesus says, "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?'"

In other words, threats and violence may be par for the course when it comes to empires. Exploiting the weak may be how economic systems function. But haven't you learned anything from your faith? Haven't the scriptures taught you that God doesn't do things the way people do things? God doesn't accomplish God's purposes by stepping on the little guy. God works by taking something that's been rejected, tossed aside, thrown away, something that seems worthless, and redeeming it; using it as the foundation for something new—a new people, a new future, a new way. And that's amazing in our eyes because it shows what real power looks like. Real power doesn't destroy. It creates. Real power doesn't take life. It gives life.

So Jesus gives them a lot to think about, and what it comes down to is: Are they going to go back to how they were living before, or are they going to adapt their behavior to fit this new understanding? Are they going to go back to living in fear, or are they going to start feeling hopeful? Are they going to go back to accepting the way things are, or are they going to start believing in the way things could be? Are they going to

go back to seeing poverty and despair as inevitable, or are they going to start realizing they're worth more than that? Are they going to go back to working their whole lives to make someone else rich, or are they going to start working to grow a different kind of harvest—a harvest of goodness and mercy; a harvest of justice and peace; a harvest of love and relationship?

These are the fruits of God's kingdom, and it's up to you, Jesus says, to produce them. Amen.