

OPENING:

Recently, on one of Fairfax County school holidays, my son and I were driving and he suddenly asked from the backseat: "What's a Jewish person?"

Turns out his kindergarten teacher is Jewish, and that day's holiday was Yom Kippur and so something in his brain must have come up with that question.

Now I am a religious professional, some might even call me a 'Chief Priest,' but I struggled to give an answer. I was really hoping that I did not fall into some anti-Semitic suggestion, hoping I did not reveal some "supersessionist" (that's the fancy word) belief about Christian superiority.

Basically, I was hoping that I did not repeat how this parable and other stories are sometimes interpreted: as self-congratulatory messages about how us righteous Christians evicted the wretched Jews from the vineyard.

Eventually, I *was* able to answer that: "Jewish people worship in a synagogue, while Christians worship in a Church, like ours." Since we were driving on Lawyers Road at that moment, I thought "Aha, there is actually a synagogue right up here, let's turn in and get your mind off my pathetic explanation."

And we pulled in, the parking lot was full, it being a High Holy Day, and there were security guards out front, wondering why our car was pulling in in the middle of the service. *That* aspect quickly became my son's focus and mine too, the sight of those armed guards. The presence of violence everywhere in our society, and in this case the threat against our Jewish brothers and sisters.

VIOLENCE:

As I was reading this passage this week, it made me think of the 1994 movie *Forrest Gump*, where there was this recurring theme of assassination, in which the title character encounters the deaths of famous figures from American history. So, as the Kennedy brothers and Martin Luther King, Jr. and John Lennon were all killed, we are forced to replay this cycle of violence in our minds, and through the lens of this character.

It's a disturbing series of images, in the parable one hears this savagery, it seems unrealistic, but then we think about our own recent history and we're not so sure.

The horrific solution that the tenant farmers had come up with was murder. If only that were contained and isolated to the world of this parable. Instead, Jesus connects the dots to Israel's past, to what happened to the prophets Jeremiah and Zechariah and the rest. And then he connects the dots to his very self, to what will happen to him. Unfortunately, we can also connect the dots to our own experience, to our own modern problem-solving and ways of dealing with conflict.

Or as Forrest Gump says: "Stupid is, as Stupid does."

PARABLES

My standard refrain about parables applies here.

Parables are dangerous, they are strange...

they use everyday language and are folksy, but they are also out of this world.

You are not supposed to "get it" as in conquer them intellectually, nor are you supposed to easily apply the supposed "point" to your own life.

Jesus' parables are descriptive, not predictive.

We are supposed to be drawn into the world of the parable and face that world, a world that ultimately asks us to follow the person telling the parable.¹

What we find in the world of this parable, and in others, is this:

God is unpredictable, but not unreliable.

"(We find that) God is only crazy, not stupid... He has arranged for (justice) to be based only on the weird goodness he is most famous for, not on the just desserts (we) have infamously imagined" for whomever.²

GOSPEL

The crux of this story comes after Jesus has set the trap for his opponents and they fall into it. Jesus asks "What would the owner do to the tenant farmers who have killed the slaves sent by the owner, and then killed his only son?"

They say: "He would murder them. Throw those wretches out."

Notice what happens next in the text.

Jesus does not affirm that. Does not agree. He does not say anything.

That's because that's how we solve problems, here on earth.

¹ Spalding, Richard E. "Pastoral Perspective" (Matthew 21.23-46) in 2011. *Feasting on the Word* (Year A, Vol. 4) Barbara Brown Taylor and David Bartlett, eds. Louisville, Presbyterian: 142.

² Capon, Robert Farrar. 2002. *Kingdom, Grace, Judgment: Paradox, Outrage, and Vindication in the Parables of Jesus*. Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 393-394.

We send in the tanks, we match violence with violence.

An eye for an eye. A tooth for a tooth. An assassination with another assassination. Jesus' opponents' response is a classic case of "projection": the respondents say this is how "God" would act, when it is actually they who would do that.

Again, that's not how Jesus solves problems.

Jesus rides in on a donkey, not on a tank.

Jesus says turn the other cheek, rather than returning the blow.

Jesus says 'I will go in your place so that violence can be atoned, forever.'

Jesus is not stupid. He knows this world is violent. He is not pie-in-the-sky, why can't we all just get along. His power is just different from ours, which is what makes it so powerful and so difficult to understand, and to follow.

To be sure, he is ready to clear the vineyard, but he does not say anything about killing anyone. Instead, in this parable, one scholar writes: "Judgement is not a divine projectile, but more like ethical gravity that knows what it is doing."

His judgement is a restorative act, not a retaliatory one.

He cares about the vineyard so much, that he is willing to upend the very structure which it is based on, which is violent competition.³

INTERPRETATION:

This is not everyone's favorite parable.

To cut Matthew some slack: the reason that he uses such tough language is that he is writing from the perspective of this early Christian community that is Jewish also. And he is trying to define the differences and explain how it's both different and the same from the synagogue.

Mileage may vary on whether we can effectively enter into its world.

We live in a world with the Separation of Church and State and the 1st Amendment and religious pluralism,

Still, we have to ask ourselves the difficult questions like:

Do we hear this parable and think? "Those Jewish people back then are bad, Jesus figured that out, glad we are not like them." If we do so, ironically, we become the Pharisees. And if we use this to justify violence or hatred against others, we are the tenant farmers.

And, more broadly speaking, we must ask ourselves: 'do WE contribute to the soil

³ Spalding, 144.

that make violence and assassination and recrimination in our culture possible?
Are we a better neighbor to those in different faith vineyards?
I believe so, but I also hope and pray for it.

CONCLUSION

It's a stretch, perhaps, to connect this to stewardship. You might have first heard this and thought that although the season of stewardship might demands accountability, *this* portrait of God *seems* a bit too demanding, with the follow up a bit too retaliatory.⁴

But it does fit in with our theme, DEEPENING OUR ROOTS.

Matthew uses this parable to say how he thinks Israel should look like:

A vineyard fenced by the law, grounded in the land, protected by worship of God in the Temple.⁵

And we might need r eminder that wherever we are, we are in God's vineyard. Here at 432 Van Buren St, across the way in the apartment complexes and the strip malls, and the other faith communities. That's God's vineyard and the conditions might seem good for stewardship or they might not, it's all God's.⁶

That begs the final question: Who would keep sending folks into that vineyard? The answer is: Only a crazy God, one who is committed to the growth of the vineyard at whatever cost, one who is willing to go to whatever length to nurture and grow and water and love his people, no matter what.

AMEN

⁴ Spalding, 140.

⁵ Hauerwas, Stanley. 2015. *Matthew*. Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 186-188.

⁶ Brown, Sally. "Homiletical Perspective" (Matthew 21.23-46) in 2011. *Feasting on the Gospel* (Vol. 2) Barbara Brown Taylor and David Bartlett, eds. Louisville, Presbyterian: 181.