



SERMONS THAT WORK

Pentecost 19A (Proper 22)

[RCL] Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20; Psalm 19; Philippians 3:4b-14; Matthew 21:33-46

Welcome to the Vineyard

A great many preaching resources that reflect on today's Gospel message seek to drive home the fact that this parable is an allegory—a parable or story with a moral or ethical message.

The trouble, however, is that when many preachers see the word allegory, they think, “Whew! Thank goodness I’ve got some room to soften things up a bit!” And more often than not, the preacher winds up serving the people of God a low-calorie sermon: easy to digest, but there’s something missing.

Often, the sermon that is preached on this text is about the landowner and his vineyard and his wicked tenants killing the landowner’s messengers over and over again, until they finally wind up killing the landowner’s own son. This must be about God sending Jesus, right? After all, things are heating up with the chief priests and the Pharisees, so Jesus must be using this parable to speak allegorically about his own coming death, right? After all, what does verse forty-five say? “When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard [Jesus’s] parables, they realized that he was speaking about them.”

Easy enough, right? The events surrounding Jesus’s death line up pretty well with this parable, so that must be it, right? We’ve solved the puzzle! The moral of the story is ‘don’t reject God.’ Case closed. Here endeth the sermon.

Well, maybe. But maybe not.

There’s still something here that doesn’t quite add up. For all our finger pointing at the chief priests and Pharisees, maybe there’s also a word here for *us*—something with a few more calories of spiritual nourishment in it.

Consider this parable alongside the events of Holy Week. During Holy Week, the pattern of worship in most of our churches moves from the loud shouts of Hosanna on Palm Sunday, to the softer notes of *Ubi Caritas* on Maundy Thursday, to the grief of Good Friday, and then the silence of Holy Saturday. We move, both literally and figuratively, from loud, to soft, to silence.

But the Holy Week we see depicted in the Gospels shows the opposite progression. When the disciples gathered for supper in the Upper Room on the night of Passover, the clamor of Jerusalem grew yet louder as the soldiers and guards approached to arrest Jesus.

Then, on Good Friday, the crowd from the night before turned into a mob, yelling and screaming and cursing, demanding that Pilate do something.

So Pilate does what military leaders do: He steps in to put down the insurrection and restore order to Jerusalem. From his view, it's clear that there's one man at the center of this all: Jesus. Get rid of him, and the pin goes back in the grenade. It's an easy, politically expedient calculation. "It's Barabbas you want released? Crucify Jesus, you say? Those are your terms for peace? Done."

And as Jesus's lifeless body is taken down from the cross, we can imagine Pilate basking in the silence. Order is restored.

Back in the vineyard, as the tenants stand over the body of their landlord's son, they're surely thinking the same thing: 'Well, that's the last time they send somebody down here to try and tell us how to run things! The old landlord is out of options! He'll surely leave us alone now! Besides, what did he know about making wine anyway? All he did was siphon off a hefty profit from our hard work. Now it's all ours!'

That old "welcome to the vineyard" sign out by the road with the landowner's name on it needed to be pulled down. Maybe they even had a catchy new logo or slogan or "under new management" sign to rebrand their ill-gotten gains.

The tenants—and Pilate—may well have enjoyed a rare moment of satisfaction—a feeling of closure on the Saturday *after* they participated in the death of an innocent man. Finally, free from that nuisance.

But then Sunday comes.

And it doesn't come with all the Easter fanfare and pageantry that we've come to enjoy during our Easter celebrations. In fact, whenever the dead are raised in Scripture—whether it's Lazarus or Jesus or some other unnamed figure—folks really don't make all that big of a fuss—at least, not at first. The truth and the power of life breaking in on death's well-worn territory takes time to settle in!

That first Easter morning at Pilate's house was probably as quiet as any other Sunday morning, and over at the vineyard, the tenants probably woke up a little dazed from the big party they had thrown the night before.

But little by little, the news got around. This Jesus fellow whom Pilate had handed over as a price for peace? Word on the street is that Pilate couldn't finish the job; that Jesus wasn't dead after all.

After the haze wore off, it must have occurred to the tenants that they could claim the vineyard as their own all they wanted, but that the landowner still had the deed. Without it, their claims were meaningless. Sooner or later, the tax adjustor or the sheriff would come knocking, and the jig would be up. Jesus's question to his listeners is chilling: "when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?"

When we slow down with Scripture, ask curious questions, and open ourselves up to fresh answers, this parable brings to bear a truth far greater than we might have first thought. This parable reminds us that even when violence and death and treachery seem to have won, they do not have the last word.

Pilate may have gone to sleep on Saturday, thinking himself a shrewd military leader, but little did he know that when he awoke on Easter Sunday, his name would be forever preserved in the creed of the very movement he thought he had defeated, next to the very man whose life he had traded as a bargain for peace—because, come what may, God will have the last word.

And those vineyard tenants? They may have very well given the vineyard a new name and a new coat of paint, but the word got around. When you deal in death, word always gets around, because, even in death, the last word still belongs to God.

In the wake of warfare and tragedy and death and chaos, whether today or two thousand years ago at Golgotha, it can be nearly impossible to see anything beyond the devastation that confronts us.

But even then—even now—in moments of grace or mercy or gentleness, the dark shroud is lifted, if only for a moment, and in wafts the fire and sweetness of God, speaking words of life into the depth and seeming finality of death, humming that old Easter hymn: Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia!

Amen.

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