

## Of Vineyards and Violence

Today's parable invites us to look closely at three different, yet equally crucial, relationships.

First, it invites us to ask about God's relationship with us.

Second, it examines our relationships with one another.

And third, it closes the circle — by bringing us face to face with how we relate to God.

We begin with how God relates to us.

As Jesus emphasizes, God is incredibly patient with us, sending faithful servants over and over again.

Even when we greet them with rejection, hatred — and even torture and murder.

But don't be fooled!

This isn't a nice story about long ago religious history that we can smile and nod our heads at.

No.

Jesus looks **us** square in the eye and asks:

"How have **you treated** God's prophets who I've sent to show **you** a better way?"

Well, Gandhi was assassinated.

So was Martin Luther King, Jr.

Nelson Mandela spent 20 years in prison.

In Hong Kong, brave student leaders are hauled to mainland China where they face who knows what in terms of torture and indecency.

Leaders of Black Lives Matter receive constant death threats.

They are vilified with slander and lies by those seeking to preserve our long and ugly heritage of racism, of white supremacy.

So the first question to ask when we are reflecting on God's relationship with us is: do we have the eyes to see and the ears to hear those whom God sends to us?

Especially in these fraught political days!

How do we respond to those who insist that "the messengers of God" are those spewing hatred and bigotry, lies and gas lighting?

Which brings us to part two of today's parable: the question of our relationship with each other.

Sister Joan Chittister asks us to listen to a story, and then think about what it says to us in this day and age.

"Once upon a time, a mountain stream that serves an entire village is somehow poisoned.

Everyone in the village goes crazy, except those few who refuse to drink the water.

The crazy ones ridicule the sane ones, while the sane ones, sick to death with loneliness, and facing dried-up wells, go to the king and ask what they should do.

The wise old king says, "It's madness to drink this water, but if drink it we must, let's at least have the honor of sending out messengers to tell the rest of the world that we know we are mad."

Sister Joan goes on to say:

"Evil is seeping into the soul of this nation, but it calls itself 'good.'

Calls itself 'freedom.'

Calls it 'self-defense.'

And that may be the greatest madness of all.

If we can only acknowledge the vastness of our spiritual distortion, perhaps we can be cured of it.

It is Jonathan Swift who wrote,

'I never wonder to see people wicked, but I often wonder to see them not ashamed.'

We need to confront the monster within — this monster that has robbed us of our shame.

This monster that allows us to dress up so willingly in the horrors of misogyny, racism, homophobia, bigotry and fear.

We need to become human.

We need to see that our economic system that delivers financial profits for the few at the expense of the many, all while pretending to be moral and good — is the very thing that's leading us to our downfall." Joan Chittister, For Everything A Season, modified.

Which of course brings us to part three of today's parable: our relationship with God.

Which poses to each and every one of us this question:

"Who owns the vineyard?"

Meaning, who owns the church buildings and grounds?

Its' bank accounts?

Who owns whatever personal wealth I may have acquired?

Who owns this country, this planet?

When huge hurricanes and uncontrollable wild fires caused by man-made global warming become a common occurrence, what is the gospel saying to our collective failure to address these crises?

When children show up on our borders and are put into cages, or when long time undocumented members of our communities face deportation, solely because they are undocumented, what are we called to do?

And what of our love affair with guns, whose primary purpose is killing, in a country that has more mass murders by gun than any nation on the planet?

I have to say that in light of today's gospel lesson, I start to squirm.

Because, my gut says, of course I own my wealth!

Of course the church can welcome or reject whomever it pleases!

Of course the second amendment enshrines my right to own as many guns as I want!

And as a citizen of this country, my rights are far superior to non-citizens!

And yet, when I see my way of thinking through the light of this parable, I'm on a collision course with Jesus.

It is a collision that "my way" cannot survive.

This morning, Jesus leads people who think just like I do through a story that leaves them hollering out:

"He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and lease the vineyard to others...!"

Who is the wretch?

I am the wretch.

I'm tightly wrapped up in, beholden to, and benefit from, the violence and self-sufficiency and justifications that "our way of life" promotes.

A way of life that, for the vast majority, is filled with struggle, inequity and pain.

It's not just me.

Like the tenants in the vineyard, we have come to believe that we are owners, not tenants.

And we have watered down the costly love of the gospel into something like a mascot sort of god, one who is cuddly and sweet.

One who adores us in our comfortable excuses.

Our wishful thinking.

Our patriotic haze.

The God of Jesus is having none of this.

Instead, the God of Jesus crushes to the ground each and every one of my opinions, my wants, my best thinking.

But this crushing happens not because me and the other miserable wretches are doomed to an awful end.

No, the crushing comes when I wake up and see that it is Jesus who comes to the awful end.

And he's done it for me.

For you.

And for the whole wide world.

You can't face this truth without being crushed.

With gratitude.

And shame.

And relief.

Jesus gives himself over to be tortured and killed, and on the third day returns – not with revenge, but with forgiveness.

And as I stand there face to face with this gracious savior, the tight grip I have on my bags of money, clutching at my rights and my privileges, well, that grip begins to loosen, as I tremble, with relief and gratitude, before the true owner of it all.

Think about it.

Isn't that the very reason why we fear God?

Because God turns upside down every expectation we have of people getting what they deserve?

Of scores being settled?

Of what we define as "fairness?"

In God, we encounter the judgment – of no judgment.

Revenge becomes forgiveness.

And scores are settled – by erasing all debts.

Why is this so frightening?

Because it undoes what we spend a lifetime creating!

Replacing “just desserts” – with faith.

With trust.

The ultimate high wire act!

With no net!

And so we discover that life isn't about us after all.

In fact, it's never been about us.

Instead, "it's all about God.

And God's marvelous truth that love is stronger than hate.

That life is stronger than death.

And that God's future is deeper and more satisfying than either the past we've created – or the future we deserve.

Because the gospel is true, we are free to treat others as Christ does.

All because the vineyard, this world, our country, my wallet, never belonged to me in the first place.” David Lose, paraphrased.

It all belongs to God.

So with that, perhaps we can smile.



And simply say "thanks be to God!"

+amen