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“Leave, Thou Almighty King”

Matthew 21:33-46

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Jesus said, "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'll respect my son.'

But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, 'This is the heir; come, let's 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.

Matthew 21:33-46

Convincing anyone of anything they do not already believe seems almost impossible. 90% of political conversation is dueling talking points.

Can you imagine Clarence Thomas saying, “I’ve been talking with my friend Sonia Sotomayor. She’s helping me think in a new way. I’ve changed my mind about the role of the courts.”

If Justice Thomas said such a thing, he would have to start paying for his own cruises.

Best-selling books reinforce what buyers thought before they bought the book. Talk shows try to make debate entertaining rather than enlightening. No one expects us to change our minds, so we get used to never changing our minds. This is not a helpful trend for preachers, but maybe it is not a new phenomenon. Maybe it has been this way for thousands of years.

When Jesus rides into Jerusalem to die, he knows who is on which side, and that he is not going to win the argument. This passage starts with what is—when Jesus says it—an ominous beginning: “Listen to another parable.”

Once upon a time there was a rich businessperson from Manhattan who bought an apple farm in the

northernmost part of the Hudson Valley. He pruned the trees, fertilized them, fixed up the sales shed, and put a brand-new hand-painted sign on Highway 17. He leased the place to a local family for less than market value with the understanding they would give him 30% of the apples.

With no business experience and high hopes of owning their own place someday, the new tenants agreed. They sealed the deal with a handshake. The rich land owner drove back to Manhattan.

The tenants loved the place like it was their own. They went out to tend the trees at dawn and stayed out each day until after dark. They used only organic pesticides. When a late frost was predicted while the first apples were tiny, they built fires throughout the orchard and stoked them all night long.

Come September, the air smelled of apples. Every time the tenants took a deep breath, their mouths watered. When it was time to harvest, it had to be done quickly, so the tenants worked in shifts—half of them sleeping while the others picked.

72 hours later it was done. Mountains of apples rose from the wooden bins in the sales shed: Red Delicious, Golden Delicious, Empire, McIntosh, Honeycrisp, and Granny Smith. Happy and exhausted, the tenants were standing there, admiring the fruits of their labor, when they heard gravel crunching under tires behind them. They turned around to see a sixteen-wheeler backing into the shed. Two big guys with bulging biceps got out and started

loading apples into the truck without even introducing themselves. One of the tenants went to make sure they understood the 30% business, and one of the big guys pushed him out of the way. The rest of the tenants held a quick meeting and decided to introduce the truckers to pitchforks and pruning hooks. They persuaded the owner's men to return to Manhattan empty-handed.

The tenants were wrong. It was not their orchard. They made a deal. The owner deserved his share of the produce, but there is something about the story that just does not sit right. No one likes an absentee landlord and the sharecropper's life is hard: tending someone else's land, bringing in someone else's harvest, and making someone else's profit.

Jesus tells a story that turns everything upside down, because normally the listeners would be cheering for the tenants. The landlord is usually the bad guy, but in Jesus' story, the tenants are the evil ones, because they have forgotten who owns the orchard. The owner could have returned violence for violence, but he did not. He kept sending messengers, one after the other, each of them pleading with the tenants to come to their senses and honor their agreement with the owner.

Finally, when there was a whole row of unmarked graves full of bill collectors outside the vineyard walls, the owner sent his son—unaccompanied and unarmed, "Surely they'll respect my son," but they will not. You know it, I know it, and the storyteller knows it. The tenants kill the

son, too (Barbara Brown Taylor, “God’s Sharecroppers,” *Gospel Medicine*, Boston: Cowley Publications, 1995, 98).

Telling this story is an act of defiance. The son of the owner is challenging the tenants who will kill him. The religious leaders, who claim to be waiting for the Messiah, know who Jesus is talking about. They plan to kill him.

“Listen,” Jesus says, but it is hard to listen to this story. Listening is hard because we still have trouble with the claims Jesus makes on us. We have the same difficulty they had. We want to be owners and not tenants. We have the mistaken notion that our life is ours. It is mine to do with what I want. It’s my time. It’s my money. It’s all mine.

But Jesus says that God is the owner. Our job is to work the vineyards. We like the idea of being Christians, but we want to be in charge. We keep a safe distance from Jesus, and what Jesus teaches. We step back, hold back, and hold off on doing what Jesus teaches. In seminaries of every stripe, professors teach preachers how to explain how Jesus did not mean what he said.

Anyone who reads the Bible honestly reads it uneasily. The Gospels can be a burden as much as anything else. Thumb through Matthew’s Gospel reading the parts in red—Jesus’ words—and it is easy to see why they killed Jesus:

“If you get angry with your brother, you’re liable to the fires of hell.”

“If anyone wants your shirt, give them your coat, too. Give to everyone who begs from you.”

“If any would come after me, let them deny themselves, and take up their cross.”

“The one who loves father or mother or son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me”—not a Mother’s Day text.

“Forgive 70 times seven times.”

“Go, sell what you have, and give to the poor, and come follow me.”

“Depart from me you cursed into the eternal fire, for I was hungry and you gave me no food.”

It is not surprising that so few followed Jesus. It is surprising that anyone tried. If we had lived during Jesus’ time and heard Jesus teaching, would we have followed? Imagine that you are walking in Brooklyn Bridge Park. You come up on a crowd listening to a speaker. The man is saying unreasonable things: “If somebody slaps your right cheek, let him slap your left cheek, too. Love your enemies. When people abuse you, pray for them. This is the way you have to act if you want to be the children of God. And you have to follow me.”

What would we do? We hope we would follow, but we do not know. Even Jesus’ best friends did not completely follow. There is a lot not to like about Jesus. I do not like it that Jesus did not have a home in which to live or material possessions. I do not like it that Jesus spent time with anyone. Jesus loves people I do not like, people whose opinions drive me crazy.

I do not like it that Jesus wants me to struggle with

what is best for others, when it is hard enough to figure out what is best for me. Sometimes we would rather not think about what God wants us to do.

We began this time of worship singing, “Come, Thou Almighty King.” The hymn is a prayer that God will come and reign over us. We are, to some degree, sincere when we ask God to come, but there are also moments when “Leave, Thou Almighty King” would be more honest, moments when we would rather not think about the one who reigns over us. Sometimes it feels like it would be easier if God would leave us alone. (Paul Duke is the first person I heard suggest the honesty of “Leave, Thou Almighty King.”)

When the son is killed in the story, Jesus asks the crowd, “What do you think the owner will do to the tenants?”

Everyone agrees, “He’s going to bash them, smite them, rip them into shreds. Then he’s going to hire new tenants who’ll give him his portion of the harvest.”

Jesus says, “That’s not who the owner is. Haven’t you read in Psalms, ‘the stone which the craftsmen rejected will be the cornerstone’? God’s love is the cornerstone that’s rejected. If people fall, the stone that kills them is not understanding God’s love.”

Jesus’ story paints a grim picture of who we are, but the owner of the vineyard is generous, patient, and persistent. God does not stop trying to reach us and change us. God’s beloved child gathers the most

unlikely Jesus' story paints a grim picture of who we are, but the owner of the vineyard is generous, patient, and persistent. God does not stop trying to reach us and change us. God's beloved child gathers the most unlikely company of followers. This small group of intermittently faithful disciples listen to Jesus' message and are transformed by it. These first followers become the foundation on which God builds the church.

Jesus' statement about the kingdom being given to those who bear fruit assumes that there are people who are not greedy. We can be those people. We have known those people. When you think about the best Christians you know, the ones who make real sacrifices for their faith, do you feel sorry for them or is it clear they have something we want? People who follow Christ have wonderful lives.

Anyone who reads the Bible honestly reads it hopefully. The Gospels are about joy as much as anything else. Thumb through Matthew's Gospel reading the parts in red, and it is easy to see why fishermen dropped their nets to follow Jesus:

"Take heart. Your sins are forgiven."

"You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world."

"Don't be anxious about your life, what you'll eat or what you'll wear. God will take care of you."

"Go and tell what you hear and see: The blind receive their sight. The lame walk. Lepers are cleansed. The deaf hear. The dead are raised up. The poor have good news preached to them."

"Come, O blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you, for I was hungry and you gave me food."

It is not surprising that finally Jesus' friends died because they had to tell the stories.

Imagine you are at a dinner party with Jesus. You hear him say, "Life is confusing. Here's what's most important. Love God with your heart, soul and mind. Love others as well as you love yourself. These two commandments are pegs. Everything hangs from them. Come to me all who labor and are heavy laden, and I'll give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me. For I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you'll find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."

There is so much to love about Jesus. I love that Jesus did not just say what was true, he lived it. I love the way he loved children, the way he loved everybody, especially the unimportant. I love how brilliant Jesus was. For 2000 years scholars have been dissecting his stories. They still do not understand it all. I love how brave Jesus was. Jesus said it straight and let the chips fall where they would—even when he knew it was going to come crashing down on him.

Jesus is the reason some of us believe in God. Jesus keeps us in the church. We are disappointed in ourselves. We know we should be farther along. We make foolish mistakes.

We can be such cowards, but in Jesus we see that God loves us. God's love is greater than our disappointments. No matter what we have been through, God understands our struggles. When we think nobody knows how hopeless we feel, God knows, and offers hope. God keeps forgiving our failures and inviting us to follow.

You and I want lots of unimportant things, but in our best moments, we want to follow Jesus. In our best moments, we live like Christians.

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