* + 1. Matthew 21:33-43

33 ‘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 watch-tower. Then he leased it to tenants and went to another country.34When the harvest time had come, he sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his produce.35But the tenants seized his slaves and beat one, killed another, and stoned another.36Again he sent other slaves, more than the first; and they treated them in the same way.37Finally he sent his son to them, saying, “They will respect my son.”38But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, “This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance.”39So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him.40Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?’41They 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.’

42 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”?
43Therefore 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 Persistent Landowner

I thought about giving this sermon the title *The Foolish Landowner* because, as we will see, the landowner’s actions fail to make any sense in our world, by our way of doing things. But the apostle Paul says “the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom” (1 Corinthians 1:25), and when we stop to examine God’s foolishness, we recognize that such foolishness is the reason we are alive. God’s “foolishness” exposes *our* foolishness. My prayer is that through today’s scripture passage you would come to love God for His persistent foolishness, and you too would be encouraged to persist in love when working with others.

The setting for today’s Gospel reading is the temple in Jerusalem. Jesus is addressing the temple priests and elders on the Monday of Passover week. The priests and elders question Jesus’ authority as they questioned John the Baptist’s. Jesus represents a real threat to their authority as well as their safety – a day earlier he had driven the money changers out of the temple as the Roman guard looked on. But the priests and elders were in a quandary: Jesus is popular with the people, and any forceful attempt to stifle him could be met with violent protest followed by Roman military action. So they take a tactful approach and attempt to silence Jesus by asserting themselves as the religious authorities. Jesus, however, foils their plans by asking them if they recognized the authority of John the Baptist, a martyred prophet who was popular with the people. The priests and elders fumble around for an answer, and Jesus chastises them in two separate parables, the first of which was presented last week.

In the second parable, today’s text, Jesus tells of a landowner who rents out his vineyard to some tenants. When the landowner sends slaves to collect the rent, the tenants kill or beat the slaves. The landowner sends more slaves and then tenants do the same to them. Finally the landowner sends his own son thinking that the tenants will respect him. Instead the tenants, thinking that they might receive the inheritance of the landowner’s heir, throw the son out of the vineyard and kill him. Jesus ends the parable by asking what the landowner will do to the tenants when he returns.

In an obvious way, this parable is a history lesson. God, the landowner, entrusted his vineyard, his people, to tenants, the priests and elders. He gave his people the Law, and the priests and elders were entrusted to guide the people in obeying the Law. But the priests and elders misunderstood the purpose of the Law. The Law was not intended to become an instrument to measure one’s personal righteousness; it was intended to give a foundation for harmonious living with God and with one another. The priests and elders used the Law to drive a wedge between people, determining that some people, themselves included, were far cleaner, far holier than others. God has sent slaves, his prophets, to collect his produce, or to make the tenants accountable for their actions, to show them that in their pride they had neglected the needs of the people. But the priests and elders failed to revere the landowner and instead they attempted to hold on to power and authority by violent means. They killed God’s messengers. God sent more messengers, and the priests and elders again killed them. John the Baptist was one such messenger, and the priests and elders could not accept him. Finally God sent his own Son, and they can’t accept him either. How could Jesus be a man of God when so many of his followers are prostitutes and tax collectors and other filthy people? Then, thinking that if they eliminate the son that they will maintain control of the people, the priests and elders kill Jesus. The parable is of course prophetic because Jesus presents it four days before his crucifixion.

But the point of this parable is not merely to give us metaphor of how the religious authorities have misled the people and used violence to protect their own positions. Jesus presents this parable to once again show us something of God’s love and grace. We see this when we recognize the absurdity of the story. The landowner sends slaves who end up getting beaten or killed by the tenants. *Why then would the landowner send more slaves?* Were you or I to put ourselves in the landowner’s shoes, we would send an army, or a police force, or a few hit men after the tenants. Nonetheless he sends more slaves who are predictably beaten or killed. So now the landowner thinks “If I send my son, surely they will respect him.” GUESS AGAIN! The son ends up getting killed as well. Are we surprised? No. Do we question the wisdom of the landowner? Yes! Why would God deliberately send people to perform a task when you and I can clearly predict that they will be killed?

Answer: God doesn’t operate the same way we do. Should God adapt to our way of doing things? Think about it. Were God to respond violently to the transgressions of the tenants, God’s justice would be done. Then again, who would be left to run the vineyard? No, it is because there is an element of the tenant in all of us that God continues to send messengers, regardless of our murderous tendencies. It is because of God’s loving nature, a nature that seeks above all to reclaim the lost sheep, that God reaches out to us, no matter how many times we kill his servants. Note that it is the priests and the elders who predict that the landowner will “put those miserable wretches to death.” That’s how we would handle such obstinacy, and we would claim that we were justified in such a response. Yet the one Being who would be most justified in retaliating stays his hand. In fact, He endures the injustice repeatedly and even offers His own son to us. Why? Because He loves us. That’s simply His nature.

It’s no accident that God has given us scripture to teach and guide us in our faith; I know of no other book that is so critical of religious authorities. Today’s parable informs us that we are the new tenants of God’s vineyard. We are entrusted with what belongs to God. We should be more than encouraged that God is so patient with us. He gives *everything* to show his love for us, and all he asks for is the same in return. As tenants, I pray that we would not only remember whose vineyard we work in; I pray that, knowing the persistent love of the landowner, we would labor joyfully throughout our lives.