

Philippians 3:4b-14

If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: ⁵circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; ⁶as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.

⁷ Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. ⁸ More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ ⁹ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. ¹⁰ I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, ¹¹ if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead. ¹² Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. ¹³ Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, ¹⁴ I press on towards the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

Matthew 21:33-46

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

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"?

⁴³ Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produce the fruits of the kingdom. ⁴⁴ The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls.'

⁴⁵ When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they realized that he was speaking about them. ⁴⁶ They wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowds, because they regarded him as a prophet.

Our Foolish and Reckless God

1. (Humbly) challenging the challenger's authority

Today's Gospel reading comes on the heels of the previous two weeks' Gospel readings, which, to remind you, occur the day after Jesus has rocked and rolled the Temple in Jerusalem, coming in unannounced, knocking over tables, driving out money changers, and giving the priests and elders a piece of his mind. He does all of this rather **humbly**, as I pointed out last week – humbly in the sense that he was submissive to the will of the Father. Jesus has the nerve to return to the Temple the next day and as we might predict he is challenged by the religious leaders who are anxious to discredit this agitator. They fail as Jesus addresses every challenge to his authority and turns the tables by **challenging his challengers' authority**. Jesus asserts that his authority comes from none-other-than God and that his motley crew of transformed sinners will be the first to enter the kingdom of God while the chief priests and elders will be the last.

2. Retell the Parable

And then he tells them this parable that we hear today, a parable of an absentee landowner and wicked tenants, *murderous and greedy* tenants who kill two of three slaves that their master sends, allowing the third to endure only a severe beating so he can go back to his master and report what has happened. The landowner sends more slaves who are treated just as brutally, and then sends his Son, thinking that the tenants will certainly respect his own Son. Well, they don't; instead they figure that by killing the Son they might receive the son's inheritance, and so they kill him. Jesus then asks the chief priests and Pharisees – that's an interesting shift here, because he started by addressing the chief priests and elders – what they think the landowner will do when he returns to his vineyard.

3. Father's and Son's Foolishness

Time out! As we've already learned by now, Jesus' parables are hard to make sense of, and this one's no exception. We're left with some serious questions that should not be ignored. First of all, what is this landowner thinking when he sends a second delegation of slaves to visit these wicked tenants? The tenants have just killed two of your slaves; what do you do? Send five more? As we might expect, the second delegation of slaves sent by the landowner is treated just as brutally as the first, so now what? Send your Son, thinking that these thugs will respect him because he's your kin? I DON'T THINK SO, and Jesus' audience wouldn't think so either, and so despite the guilt of the murderous tenants you have to wonder if the landowner isn't partially to blame for putting additional slaves in harm's way, and when the obvious occurs, when the second delegation of slaves meets the same fate as the first, you'd think that the landowner might get the hint?? If I served this landowner, I might ask, "Sir, do you really think that your Son will fare any better than those who preceded him?" And if the Son was aware of what went down between these tenants and the previous two delegations of slaves, do you think he's going to be okay with his dad's instructions to go and collect the rent from these

guys? I DON'T THINK SO. I think he might want to have a little talk with Dad, do a little reality check. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out what will happen next.

4. Who's who/Foolishness is the key to getting it

Of course you've probably figured out who represents who in this little parable; the landowner is God, who hires tenants, the chief priests and elders, to tend the land, the nation of Israel. The slaves are the prophets, sent by God and killed by the religious leaders, and the Son is of course Jesus, sent by the Father and destined to be killed at the hands of the religious authorities. We "get" the wickedness of the chief priests and elders. We "get" their desire to hold onto power and authority rather than surrender their "produce." We "get" the fact that they killed the true servants of God and that they end up killing his Son as well. What we don't "get" is the foolishness of both Father and Son in this parable, yet this is the key to the Gospel, to the good news to which we are called to bear witness.

5. God's nature / hope beyond hope / tragicomedy turned victory

Call it foolishness this naivety of both Father and Son, this "unrealistic" expectation of the wicked tenants. Our human nature informs us that the tenants are rotten to the core and warns us not to repeat our mistakes only to suffer ever more loss. That's our human nature. But what about divine nature? What of God's nature? God remains forever hopeful that those who are corrupt, even murderous, will somehow change their ways. So what if the tenants murder or beat up the first three slaves; he gives them another chance. Okay, that didn't work; they treated these servants the same way they treated the first set. Let me send my Son. And the Son, who reflects the naïve optimism of his Father and who is obedient to the Father, says, "Sure Dad, I'll go." The story would be a tragic comedy were it not for the fact that God is the main actor, that what we destroy God is capable of resurrecting. But the story is in fact *our* story, it is the story of a God whose love is beyond reason sending his Son, whose love is also beyond reason, in order to harvest fruit for the kingdom.

6. God remains God in nature/priest's answer not God's answer/resurrection is first fruit.

And the death of the slaves and the death of his Son do not lead God to act out of character – they don't incur God's wrath. They don't diminish his love in the least. Jesus asks the priests and Pharisees what *they* think the landowner will do when he returns, and the priests and Pharisees respond in accordance with their own nature; they would kill the murderous tenants. But note that Jesus does not tell them they have answered correctly. Jesus only tells them that the kingdom, the vineyard, will be taken from the wicked tenants. In other words, this foolish, loving God will overcome evil in the end, and the first evidence of that is the resurrection his Son Jesus.

7. Paul, the murderous tentant, got it.

Do you “get” that? Do you “get” the foolish, reckless love of God? Paul did; that’s why he could say that the only thing that mattered to him anymore was Jesus Christ. Paul had been that murderous tenant, but he had experienced that foolish, reckless love that informed him that he was forgiven. It’s that foolish, reckless love of God that is both our inspiration and the model we are to follow in our lives. I recently watched the movie “Les Miserables” and if you haven’t seen it or read the books, I would highly recommend you do. The story begins with a convict named Jean Valjean, a convict who has spent nineteen years in prison and is finally released from prison, having a horrible time finding food or work or shelter due to the fact that he *is* a convict. He finally finds food and shelter at the home of a priest, Bishop Myriel. Fearing for his own future, Jean Valjean wakes in the middle of the night, steals the Bishop’s silverware only to be caught by police the next day who find him carrying the bishop’s silverware. Jean Valjean lies to the police, telling them that the bishop *gave* him the silverware, and the police, who of course don’t believe this, bring Jean Valjean back to Bishop Myriel with the silverware. When the police captain tells the bishop that Valjean claims that he was given the silverware, Bishop Myriel tells them it’s true, and goes a step further, telling Valjean that he forgot to take the silver candleholder which are worth a whole lot more. The dumbfounded police release Jean Valjean, and a dumbfounded Jean Valjean is told by Bishop Myriel that he is no longer who he used to be, that he has a new life now, a life that has been bought by the silverware and the candleholders.

8. Bishop Myriel understood that love changes lives. All are guilty

Bishop Myriel understood the foolish and reckless love of God, a love that sees us not as criminals but as his own children. And Bishop Myriel acted upon that understanding by treating others the way that foolish, reckless God treats us. And Bishop Myriel’s foolish, reckless love forever changed the life of Jean Vanjean who also projected foolish, reckless love toward others. Had Bishop Myriel relied upon human law to respond to the theft of his property, human justice would have been done. But divine justice empowers us. It enables us to see the love and grace that have changed our lives and to believe that such love and grace can change every life.

9. Act recklessly/foolishly

May we be so inspired by such foolish and reckless love that we too might exercise such foolish and reckless love and that our foolish and reckless God may establish his kingdom on earth as it is in heaven.