

Sermon, St. David's Episcopal Church, 10/8/2023, Matthew 21:33-46 (*Elizabeth Felicetti*)

The last four times this particular set of readings came up, in 2020, 2017, 2014, and 2011, I chose to preach on the Ten Commandments. I love the Old Testament and as you all know I preach from it constantly; but honestly, I preached on the Ten Commandments those times because I did not want to preach on this parable.

Last Sunday I had a conversation with one of you about how Jesus taught in parables instead of just teaching in a more straightforward way. At the time I was excited because last week's parable was not a muddy one, but then we get this week's, and I want to just preach on the Ten Commandments because they are easier. But Jesus' parables are intentionally provocative. They aren't stories with easy morals. The New Testament scholar Dr. Amy-Jill Levine writes that "Reducing parables to a single meaning destroys their aesthetic as well as ethical potential."<sup>1</sup>

I avoid this parable of the wicked tenants because Christians like us have used it to denigrate Judaism, associating Israel with the tenants and Jesus with the son and heir and God as the landowner and reading it as the vineyard being taken from Jews and given to Christians. This is antisemitic and falls into a heresy called "supersessionism." I don't throw around the word "heresy" very often, so, I obviously feel strongly about this. Most of the time I tell you that what you believe is your own business, and here we worship the same way, in classical Anglican style. But since I am labelling something a heresy today, let me define "heresy" for you as a belief that undermines the Gospel: that is, the good news of Jesus Christ.

Supersessionism, a heresy, is the wrong belief that Christianity replaced Judaism so we Christians are now God's people and Jewish people are no longer God's people. This is not accurate and is deeply offensive to Jews and should be offensive to us. Jesus was not a white Anglo-Saxon trying to convert Jews to Christianity with this parable. Jesus was a Jew and died and was resurrected as a Jew, and in today's reading, Jesus is in the Jewish temple speaking to others who practice his same deeply treasured religion. The Gospel of Matthew, which we have been hearing most Sundays since Advent, was written by a Jew for a Jewish audience.

The way our church year is laid out we may get confused about where we are on any given Sunday in the story of Jesus. We start with Advent, with readings mostly before Jesus' birth, then after Christmas jump right into his adult baptism and public ministry, then in Lent our Sunday readings speed toward Holy Week, followed by the Easter season with resurrection appearances. During this long green season after Pentecost, however, we go *back* to the time before Holy Week. So it gets confusing.

When Jesus shares today's parable in the Gospel of Matthew, he has already entered Jerusalem. Palm Sunday is past, as is his time in the temple getting mad and overturning tables; but the Garden of Gethsemane, when he will ask his disciples to wait with him while he prays but they fall asleep instead: that hasn't happened yet.

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<sup>1</sup> Levine, Amy-Jill. *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi*. New York: HarperOne, 2014, 1.

In today's reading, Jesus is teaching in the temple. The chief priests and elders had just questioned his authority—that was in last week's reading—and he told them the parable from last week about the two sons. They challenged him, and he challenged them back with last Sunday's parable, and now with this one.

Because Jesus was speaking to a Jewish audience, this parable would have almost certainly made them all think of Isaiah 5, the story of a vineyard that despite tender care yielded rotten grapes. God was the vineyard owner who lovingly tended the vineyard—that is, God's people—but despite the loving care, the vineyard yielded rotten grapes. This time, instead of the grapes being rotten, the tenants who were leasing the vineyard were rotten, killing the landowner's slaves as well as his son.

The crowd, the Gospel explicitly tells us, the crowd listening to these parables regarded Jesus as a prophet, like Isaiah was a prophet. The parallel between the stories was deliberate and shows Jesus' deep knowledge of Scripture. Jesus was calling these listeners to repent, to change, to reform. He was preaching. He was provoking. He called people in his own tradition, people whom he loved, to change their hearts and minds and actions. He was recalling the story of God's people that had happened over and over again: that people turned away from God toward other things, and then ruin and destruction followed.

The danger in this parable is that we hear those chief priests and Pharisees as “them” instead of as “us.” The violence in this provocative parable is so extreme that we may be tempted to see it as something someone else does instead of seeing ourselves as those tenants. That's a danger of teaching in parables. We aren't doing these terrible extreme things, so he must be talking about someone else, like the wicked people who crucified him. But the chief priests and the Pharisees, we hear, realized Jesus was speaking about them. Despite the hyperbole and violence, they recognized themselves.

If we can't quite see ourselves in the violent evil tenants, let's try to see ourselves in those chief priests and Pharisees. They were the committed religious people, like we are, gathered in this room on a Sunday morning or else participating via the stream. We aren't at Waffle House or IHOP—at least not yet. Our religion means something to us, so we show up at church. Christianity means something to us. Jesus means something to us.

If only he could speak a little less enigmatically. If only he told us how to be good tenants instead of speaking in parables.

But if in this story he offers little hope, Jesus is clear elsewhere. Jesus wants us to take care of our neighbor: to feed and clothe them and visit them in prison. Jesus was moved by the ones who lowered their friend through a hole in the ceiling so he could be healed. Jesus loved children and demanded that they be treated with respect and love. Jesus reached out to the marginalized, the overlooked, the unloved, and Jesus offered those undesirable people his vineyard.

Despite this enigmatic and deeply disturbing parable, we do know what we need to do to show our love for Jesus. How are you going to express love today?