

"DANCING A PRAYER"

Matthew 21:33-46

October 8, 2017

The Story of the Greedy Farmhands

³³⁻³⁴ "Here's another story. Listen closely. There was once a man, a wealthy farmer, who planted a vineyard. He fenced it, dug a winepress, put up a watchtower, then turned it over to the farmhands and went off on a trip. When it was time to harvest the grapes, he sent his servants back to collect his profits.

³⁵⁻³⁷ "The farmhands grabbed the first servant and beat him up. The next one they murdered. They threw stones at the third but he got away. The owner tried again, sending more servants. They got the same treatment. The owner was at the end of his rope. He decided to send his son. 'Surely,' he thought, 'they will respect my son.'

³⁸⁻³⁹ "But when the farmhands saw the son arrive, they rubbed their hands in greed. 'This is the heir! Let's kill him and have it all for ourselves.' They grabbed him, threw him out, and killed him.

⁴⁰ "Now, when the owner of the vineyard arrives home from his trip, what do you think he will do to the farmhands?"

⁴¹ "He'll kill them—a rotten bunch, and good riddance," they answered. "Then he'll assign the vineyard to farmhands who will hand over the profits when it's time."

⁴²⁻⁴⁴ Jesus said, "Right—and you can read it for yourselves in your Bibles:

The stone the masons threw out
is now the cornerstone.

This is God's work;

we rub our eyes, we can hardly believe it!

"This is the way it is with you. God's kingdom will be taken back from you and handed over to a people who will live out a kingdom life.

Whoever stumbles on this Stone gets shattered; whoever the Stone falls on gets smashed."

⁴⁵⁻⁴⁶ When the religious leaders heard this story, they knew it was aimed at them. They wanted to arrest Jesus and put him in jail, but, intimidated by public opinion, they held back. Most people held him to be a prophet of God.

Well, that's a lovely story for our Sunday morning! This sounds a lot like our news of late. I know you are tired and wary of picking up the newspaper or your phone, or listening to the news on TV or radio. We all have what I have heard termed, "compassion fatigue." We have been asked to lend our collective grief to so many heart-wrenching stories of late that we don't even know how to divide our energies.

For example, when Hurricane Harvey hit, Chris and I opened our checkbook and made a donation to UCC Disaster Ministries on the following Sunday. Then, Hurricane Irma hit, and we pulled out our checkbook again and made a donation for relief efforts in our US

Southeast. We watched and worried for our family in Florida as we were checking in with our friends in Texas, too.

And then, Puerto Rico and Dominica got pulverized, and we made yet another donation, this time to a direct-source charity. It was like a circus juggling act, and we have not been able to keep all our balls up in the air at once. Barely catching our breath, we are perhaps feeling incredible "survivor's guilt" here in the safety and relative calm of Colorado. While much of our southern seaboard is still under water and much of our northwest is in flames, the mass shooting in Las Vegas steals the news and we find ourselves sitting in disbelief and wondering what, oh what has happened in our country in the last several weeks! We ask to what seems like empty air, "Where, oh where, is God in this story of wreck and ruin?"

It's important to learn, or to remember if you already know, that a parable is a made-up story, a teaching tool used by Jesus to make a point about God and God's will for their time and place. This particular parable is in the nature of an allegory, where everything in the story is symbolic of something else. When Jesus tells a parable, he is not being a news reporter. He is being a storyteller using a very specific form of

story-telling so as to evoke in the listener an examination of their own values and ethics.

In parable, Jesus is using local knowledge and made up, but accessible characters to cause the hearer to think about how they are living out their faith. He is using common situations for his time and context to get people—religious leaders and commoners alike, to live a justice-and-compassion life rather than to be armed only with law and order.

In this parable, Jesus is telling his own future, but he is also confronting the Jewish religious leaders for rejecting God when they reject him. He is telling a parable about what will be happening to him, that he and his message will be rejected by the "greedy farmhands," a not-very subtle reference to the religious leaders who claim to speak for God. God is the absent landowner, not because God has abandoned the people, but rather, because God has left humankind to determine their own fruitfulness or make their own mistakes. Williams college Chaplain Richard Spalding puts it this way: "...mature faith means practicing sound values and sound devotion on our own, even when God seems distant."

In the allegory-parable that we just heard Bill read, the absent landowner is God. The greedy farmhands are the Pharisees. The

servants who were rejected are the prophets warning the people of the coming of God's judgment, perhaps in ancient times. The servant who they first killed might be John the Baptist, betrayed into Herod's hands and unjustly murdered by his order.

The son, sent by the landowner, the son who should surely be respected, is Jesus, foretelling his own rejection by the very people who should love him. And the farmhands who inherit the vineyards is the church, the faithful and hopeful ones who come after Jesus to bring the word of justice and compassion into the world.

That is how Matthew's allegory lines up. But the beauty of allegory is that it can be interpreted so that the parable stays relevant in current times. And that's what I think we need this morning in our country. We are straining in a season of big storms. We are burdened by a season of uncontrolled anger. We are buckling under the weight of this season of homeland violence that makes no sense and a threat of international violence that seems to threaten both physical borders and ethical boundaries.

I invite you to think of the parable as standing for the following symbols: Picture the vineyard owner as the Great American Dream,

the America that seemed in our remembered lifetimes to be a place of stability, of certainty, and of prosperity. That America seemingly has gone AWOL, and we are left without a clear compass needle pointing us in any agreed direction of truth and justice. The American way is all jumbled up.

The greedy farmhands might well be those storms, both natural and manmade, that threaten to kill our hope. The greedy farmhands of compassion fatigue have gripped the nation, and our frenzied attempts to protect our American hearts threaten to rob us of our compassion, our charitable connections, and our collective optimism.

Jesus tells of a time when the threads are about to fail, a time when the fabric of Jewish religious society is about to be torn apart. The Pharisees didn't see it coming; they turned a blind eye to his prophecy and his promise. They were neatly sewn up in a quilt of their own deception; they believed that if they kept order and law in front of the people that they would be sheltered from the storm of Roman occupation and the wages of separation from God. Jesus warned that law and dogmatic practice would not feed hungry mouths or make sense out of the senseless violence that was to come. He tried to bring the vineyard owner home to the farmhands, but they rejected

his efforts and killed their God a little more each day until they finally killed the very fruit of the vine when they killed Jesus.

That's kind of how it feels today for many, and you don't have to be one who has lost your home or your animals or your friend or your grandmother or your job or your sense of neighborhood to feel that way. We are all feeling uneasy; we are all wondering why the vineyard owner does not magically reappear and save the suffering messengers, the sons and daughters of faith.

In 1968, an unknown Texas singer songwriter wrote a musical story about a very low time in his life when his drinking and carousing caused him to spend a hard night on the cold floor of a New Orleans jail cell. Jerry Jeff Walker was one of the original Outlaws singers, along with the likes of Willie Nelson, Waylon Jennings, and Merle Haggard. But in 1968, no one knew him. He was 26 years old, he was broke, and he made his living playing in honkytonks across the South for "drinks and tips," just like in his song, "Mr. Bojangles." The Nitty Gritty Dirt Band made this song famous, but it was Jerry Jeff Walker who wrote the moving parable about being down and out and about being saved by an unlikely prophet. The song was about rediscovery Hope and Humanity in a chance encounter across difference.

Mr. Bojangles was a fellow jail inmate who took an opportunity born in despair to preach to his fellow down-and-outers with his feet and his story. It's a beautiful story of redemption and relationship. It's a healing story for our times, when we seem to have lost our way and perhaps we can find it in the stories of those who may very well have lost more than we will ever have.

As you listen to this ballad, listen to it as an allegory. What are the symbols that pop up in your mind when you hear the story? Who is Jesus? Where is God? Where is redemption found, and where do you connect with this story as it knocks at the door of your own life?

Today, as you convene downstairs for the all-church conversation and we pray together a prayer of thanksgiving that we have found each other, maybe we will remember the image of an old black minstrel man entertaining fellow travelers with a soft shoe dance. Maybe before we finish our prayer in asking for insights and inspirations, we will think of Jesus as our cornerstone that cannot be broken. Maybe as you start your conversations against a backdrop of a country that seems under tremendous stress right now, you will remember God as the vineyard owner who returns in due time to give the church's future over to you.

It is a sacred trust that God has given us. It is sacred trust that we—I as your pastor and you as your congregation—hold and preserve together. And preserve it now we must. The prophets died for it. John the Baptist died for it. And Jesus died for it, too, that God's word would live on, not as before in law and in exclusivity, but rather in heart and in radical inclusivity.

It is our sacred trust responsibility to spread compassion and justice in the world. It is our sacred trust calling that when we give the church its yearly physical examination, we overlook small blemishes that may mark our outer skin. It is our sacred trust calling that we recognize and honor our scars and our imperfections, giving thanks for the lessons they have taught us. And it is our sacred trust calling that we concern ourselves going forward with the strength of our collective beating heart and the temperature of our evolving Jesus mission. This conversation will make us a truer church; this conversation will remind us that we are all one in the Body of Christ. This will be a conversation that brings us hope, reminds us of higher purpose, and speaks with love the light of God, the vineyard owner.

As Hope seems to be struggling under the weight of unrelenting attack, we find ourselves turning from one disaster to another and another and another such that we are dizzying ourselves turning around

and around trying to pay attention to all of it. We are overwhelmed, feeling helpless perhaps to resolve anything, as we sit in the jail cells of our own making watching someone else telling their story in a parable song of love and life. So, Jesus reminds us to not forget to speak up for the work that God is doing in our lives and in this collective ministry we call "church." Jesus reminds us to not forget to croak out our words of prayer, even if the loudest voice we can muster is just above a mere whisper when we ask God to show us how to live hopefully in uncertain times: "Please, Mr. Bojangles," we beseech God, "please Mr. Bojangles..... dance."

May it Be So.