

Mercy – The Cornerstone

Eighteenth Sunday After Pentecost

October 8, 2017

Matthew 21: 33-46

Every now and then I like to drive by houses where I used to live, just to see what's changed. It always feels good to see hanging baskets on the back deck or a fresh coat of paint. And it doesn't feel so good to see overgrown bushes or broken windows. Maybe you've had the same experience. Even if you sold the property and no longer have a stake in it, or if you rented and never owned place, if you lived there and made memories and left a part of yourself in it, you don't like to see a place neglected.

That little, common human experience gives us a window into the heart of God. What does God think when God drives by and sees how we are treating this home, God's world?

I think God is a lot like the landowner in this story. That's not always the case in the parables. In some stories of Jesus the landowner is evil, not good. But this landowner is as intentional and loving and persistent as God. This landowner carefully and deliberately planted a vineyard. This landowner put a fence around it to protect it. This landowner improved the property to make it profitable. This landowner dug a winepress and built a watchtower. This landowner even set up a system to share the profits. When everything was ready, he leased it to some tenants who would work the land and earn some income which many landless people in Jesus's day had to do to survive. This landowner trusted them with the work. He did not stay around to micromanage the process. He gave them freedom and went away, trusting the tenants to take care of things.

And they did at first. The land produced a harvest, so the tenants must have been doing something right. But when they saw the abundance of the harvest, things got ugly. The tenants decided to keep it for themselves. Caring only about their own self-interest they turned to violence. They beat, killed, and stoned the messengers who came from the landowner – even the landowner's own son.

We see the parallels, don't we. God lovingly, carefully, deliberately planted a vineyard – not just one vineyard but a world full of them. God set up a fence – laws of love to guide and order the world. The 10 commandments, which we read today, are not a burden. They are a boundary. They bring order to chaos. They are God's highest hope for us, and life is good when we follow them. Then after building this fence God left this world in our care, trusting we would make it

fruitful, knowing we have everything we need. But rather than share in God's abundance, we responded with self-interest and violence, going even so far as to crucify the son of God.

Jesus told this story during Holy Week, right after entering Jerusalem in triumph, not long after cleansing the Temple, just a few days before he was arrested. Everyone was still talking about the incident in the Temple. The religious leaders were in an uproar. They asked him by what authority he was doing these things. And in the midst of that frightening week, he told this story.

Many interpretations of this parable read it as a condemnation of the Jewish people. Even the chief priests and Pharisees thought it was about them. This was one of many encounters with Jesus that led the religious authorities to want to arrest him.

But we should not read this as if it is only about one group of people at one place at one time in history. This is a parable about all of us. We live in a fruitful world. God has given us fences to order our existence and make us productive. God has given us freedom to care for this world and share in its abundance. We are the tenants. And like the tenants in this story, we often respond God's generosity with self-interest and violence and greed.

Some violence is obvious and horrifying, like the 58 people murdered and nearly 500 injured one week ago tonight in Las Vegas by one individual with no clear motive. Like the violence in our city that frightens and confuses us.

And while we can attribute some violence to specific evil people, we cannot escape the reality that we live in a violent culture. We are not too different from the Roman world in which Jesus lived. We are horrified today by the so called games that went on in Roman coliseums, where human beings were thrown to the lions or killed by gladiators for sport. But the entertainment industry today still assumes we will pay money to watch fights and explosions and shootings and death on the big screen. We haven't changed that much.

The landowner knew the tenants were violent. They seized the first messenger who came to collect the rent. They killed the second. They stoned the third. The landowner knew what they were like. But the landowner did not give up. The landowner did not respond to violence with violence. He did not muster a security force or throw bigger stones. Instead, he continued to reach out in love and mercy. He continued to believe the best in the tenants – "They will respect my son."

Jesus asked the religious leaders what they thought the landowner would do to the tenants. They responded in an interesting way. They said he would "put those wretches to a miserable death, and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the harvest time." It was a logical response. It was what they would do. An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.

But is that really what this landowner would do? I don't think so. It is not what he did at any point in this story. Retaliation was not in this landowner's toolkit. He just kept coming back, like

the shepherd looking for that one lost sheep or the woman looking for one lost coin. That's what God is like. God keeps coming back, never giving up, hoping for the best in all of us.

So Jesus did not confirm their answer. He just quoted a psalm –

The stone the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone.

What is that stone? Yes, it is Jesus – who just a few days later would be rejected and crucified and then raised in power. But it is also the way of Jesus. It is the way of mercy, the way of vulnerability and nonviolence and peace. Mercy looks so weak and misshapen no one would think to build on it. Some argue that mercy is just not practical. Evil must be answered harshly. Violence must be contained with violence. Mercy does not seem strong enough to put limits around evil. So mercy is often rejected.

But we have to remember that mercy is not a free pass. Mercy does not say anything goes – that's chaos. Instead, mercy loves and respects life. Mercy seeks safety for everyone. The Ten Commandments are all about mercy because they create a world where everyone can flourish. That's mercy.

So while it seems weak, mercy is the strongest thing there is. Because we live in God's world and because God overflows with mercy, mercy is the building block. Mercy is the chief cornerstone. Mercy breaks us to pieces. Mercy overwhelms and crushes and then rebuilds all who receive it.

I heard a story about mercy on Friday, on Story Corps if you ever listen to that. A black man was working as head of security at a high school. One of the students was the head of a neo-Nazi group. The student would get into fights at school. The head of security would take him to the dean's office. The student would yell racist insults at him all the way.

The head of security acknowledged that in his younger days he might have responded in kind. But instead he chose mercy. He said, "I knew you were a 16-year-old kid. I knew you had been brainwashed. And so I wanted the opportunity to get through to you."

Eventually, the student did change his ways. After eight years as a neo-Nazi, he renounced the movement's racist principles. He now runs a global organization of former extremists who help people leave hate groups. And he credited the head of security for his change. "It was that compassion when I didn't deserve it that eventually stuck."

Imagine if that head of security had met the young man's hate with more hate? Instead, he met hate with compassion, and mercy changed everything.

The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord's doing, and it is amazing in our eyes.

<http://www.npr.org/2017/10/06/555934000/the-man-who-helped-change-a-neo-nazi-s-mind>

