

Title: Encountering Evil

Let us pray.

Most holy, Lord God, there are times when we don't know our own character until we are faced with adversity; strengthen us to do your will in good times and bad and may we always be blessed by your shalom we pray, through the Prince of Peace, Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

Sometimes, our brains go haywire. We will do things that we know is wrong, but we do them anyway. Things might come out of our mouth that we suddenly wish it wasn't said. We might break a speed limit. We might jaywalk. We might buy something that later ends up in a yard sale.

Most of the time, these things we do that we later regret can be rectified by either asking for forgiveness, doing some kind of restitution, or just living with the act and/or consequences. This is normal living. This is being a normal human being. Certainly not ideal, but we are flawed.

Then there are more systemic issues. This is when our brains go really haywire. Some people are psychopaths. Some people are sociopaths. Some people have anger control issues.

God makes it quite clear that killing someone else is wrong. It is one of the Ten Commandments. God declared that all life belongs to God, not us. God said that human blood is sacred and is not to be shed, because it belongs to God. And Jesus said on the Sermon on the Mount, "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also. You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven." (Matthew 5:38-39, 43-45a)

Jesus addresses evil. Jesus talks about people who are wicked. The Parable of the Wicked Tenants is about greed, violence, and murder. It is about a vineyard that is a biblical metaphor for Israel. God is the owner of the vineyard.

It is harvest time. The absentee vineyard owner sends slaves to collect the produce of the harvest. The tenants who worked the vineyard chose not to share the fruits of their labor. The vineyard owner was due his share of the harvest. When the owner attempted to collect his share, the tenants beat one slave, killed another, and stoned yet another. The owner responds by sending more slaves than the first group. There should be safety in numbers. The tenants treated the second group like the first.

So, the owner thinks that they will treat his son with respect and the son will be able gather the harvest. However, the tenants saw an opportunity to seize the vineyard for themselves by killing the son. According to Jewish law, if a landowner died without an heir, the tenants who lived and worked on the land could have the final claim.

The whole story was troubling. It provoked a visceral response of a need for justice. When Jesus asked the authorities what would happen to the tenants when the owner shows up, they reply that owner will kill the tenants and give the vineyard to other tenants who will do their job and give the owner what belongs to the owner.

The tenants forgot that they were guests in the vineyard and not management. We, too, forget that we are guests of creation and not management. The produce of the vineyard is entrusted to the tenants. They do not own it.

Jesus then quotes Psalm 118:22-23. The builders rejected the cornerstone. The capstone completes the building project. Then Jesus gets explicit. The kingdom of God will be taken away from the religious authorities and given to a people who will bear fruit for the kingdom.

The religious authorities likely already knew that the vineyard is Israel. Seemingly, it is only after Jesus connects the dots for them that they realize that they are the wicked tenants. Matthew tells us that they wanted to do to Jesus exactly what the wicked tenants did. They feared the crowds and bided their time.

Our actions are formed by our thoughts and feelings. The main motivation for the wicked tenants was greed. When the owner sought to get his cut, he did nothing through labor to earn any produce. What he did have was the

land without which, there would be no produce. The owner was also an absentee landlord. The owner had no apparent access to any enforcement agency. The tenants saw no consequences for exercising their greed. Once the tenants resorted to the murder of the owner's slaves, any means would justify their means of keeping all the produce.

The religious authorities, for whom the parable was about, were willing to kill, especially if they were to outsource the killing to someone else, namely the Romans. The Romans were the law. Jesus was a threat to the religious authorities. The authorities were the only source of religious arbitration and teaching. Usurpers were not welcome.

On Monday morning, October 2, as I was watching TV report after report, I screamed out, "Why?" We want to know what motivates people, especially if they do horrendous things. How could anyone think or feel things that would motivate them to kill people they don't even know. We may never know why Stephen Paddock did what he did. We do know that he planned the killings.

I am assuming that Paddock thought that the shooting at a mass of people was a means to an end. Yet what was done was indiscriminate violence done with weapons of mass destruction. Like the tenants, Paddock may have assumed that he is a free agent and not accountable to our vineyard's owner.

Though we don't know Paddock's feelings, there must have been hate and, likely, anger. Everyone who had contact with Paddock, except Paddock's brother, knew him as an angry man. It is very difficult to premeditate murder. The tenant's resentment of the owner and everyone associated with the owner grew to hate. The religious authorities developed a hate for Jesus and everything Jesus stood for.

We may feel helpless in the face of such violence. There were people in Las Vegas who did not feel helpless. They took action and saved lives. In the face of evil, there were people who reacted with hope and helped others.

We are called to be faithful *and* grateful tenants of the vineyard. We have a message to share. We have the gospel, the good news. The good news is that God loves us and will be with us in this life and the next. Our response to

God's love is to love others. Love is the destiny of the earth and we are the messengers in word and deed.

Text: **Matthew 21:33–46** (NRSV)

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

<sup>42</sup> Jesus said to them, “Have you never read in the scriptures:

‘The stone that the builders rejected  
has become the cornerstone;<sup>f</sup>  
this was the Lord’s doing,  
and it is amazing in our eyes’?”

<sup>43</sup> Therefore 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.<sup>g</sup> <sup>44</sup> The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls.”<sup>h</sup>

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

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<sup>f</sup> Or *keystone*#

<sup>g</sup> Gk *the fruits of it*

<sup>h</sup> Other ancient authorities lack verse 44

<sup>i</sup> [\*The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version\*](#). (1989). (Mt 21:33–46). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.