

It's Mine!

Matthew 21:33-46

John Breon

A farmer bought some property that was run down and overgrown with brush and weeds. He worked hard to clean it up and, after a couple of years, it was a beautiful place producing great crops. Someone came by one day and commented, "You and the Lord sure have done a nice job with this place." The farmer replied, "Yeah, well you should have seen it when the Lord had it by himself!"

Now that makes a point about how God wants our cooperation and expects us to work. But the story also reflects an attitude that seems to say, "It's mine. I did it myself. Why should I give God any of the credit?"

We run into that attitude in this parable Jesus tells to the religious authorities in Jerusalem. In the story, a landowner plants a vineyard, puts a hedge or wall around it, digs the winepress, and builds a watchtower. He prepares it and provides all that's needed for growing and harvesting grapes. Then, as many landowners in Palestine in Jesus' time did, he rents out the vineyard and goes away to another country. At harvest time he sends servants to collect his share of the crop that was due him as rent.

But the tenants who have worked the vineyard have become possessive. They don't want to give the owner what he's due. So they seize his servants—beating one, killing another, stoning another. Patiently, maybe foolishly, the owner sends more servants, but the tenants treat them in the same way.

In that culture, how you treated messengers is how you would treat the one who sent them. The tenants show disdain, even hatred, for the landowner.

Finally, the owner sends his own son. "They will respect my son," he says. But the tenants think that if they kill the son they can take over the vineyard. It will truly be theirs. So they take the owner's son, throw him out of the vineyard, and kill him.

Parables usually have one main point. Normally, we don't look for some meaning in every detail of the story. This parable is kind of an exception. Several of the details do represent reality.

The landowner represents God. In the Old Testament, Israel was God's vineyard. Listen to what Isaiah 5:1-7 says:

I will sing for the one I love a song about his vineyard: My loved one had a vineyard on a fertile hillside. He dug it up and cleared it of stones and planted it with the choicest vines. He built a watchtower in it and cut out a winepress as well. Then he looked for a crop of good grapes, but it yielded only bad fruit.

"Now you dwellers in Jerusalem and people of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard. What more could have been done for my vineyard than I have done for it? When I looked for good grapes, why did it yield only bad? Now I will tell you what I am going to do to my vineyard: I will take away its hedge, and it will be destroyed; I will break down its wall, and it will be trampled. I will make it a wasteland, neither pruned nor cultivated, and briars and thorns will grow there. I will command the clouds not to rain on it."

The vineyard of the LORD Almighty is the nation of Israel, and the people of Judah are the vines he delighted in. And he looked for justice, but saw bloodshed; for righteousness, but heard cries of distress."

There are echoes of this "song of the vineyard" in the story Jesus tells.

The servants in the parable represent the prophets God had sent to assert his ownership and claim the fruit of righteousness. As part of God's covenant with Israel, the people were called to be a light to the nations. But they often denied that call. Sometimes they abused the prophets or killed them. The tenants didn't own the vineyard; they were to be stewards of it. But they thought they would be owners. The attitude represented in the tenants is, "It's ours and we'll do with it as we please" instead of, "It's God's and he has sent us here to speak a word and be a light for the whole world."

Still, God is kind to his enemies in ways that are hard to understand. No real landowner or patron in that time would have been so benevolent as to keep sending servants instead of taking revenge on the tenants right away. By continuing to appeal to their sense of honor, the landowner makes himself look foolish. To keep any trace of his own honor, he should retaliate against them for shaming him again and again.

But the landowner acts with such kindness that people hearing Jesus tell the story probably thought the owner's action was total foolishness. He believes that the murderous tenants will at least respect his son who is his own representative (Craig Keener, *Matthew, The IVP New Testament Commentary Series*). "They will respect my son," he says.

The son in the parable represents Jesus, sent from the Father to announce the kingdom, to begin to make it a reality, to claim the people's allegiance. Jesus follows in the long line of prophets that God sent to Israel. But since he is Messiah and Son of God, he has a unique and decisive role (Donald Senior, *Matthew, Abingdon New Testament Commentaries*). Jesus knows that in just a few days his rejection by the religious establishment will be complete. They'll take him outside Jerusalem and kill him.

The Pharisees and chief priests don't yet see themselves in the parable. When Jesus asks what the landowner in his story will do to the tenants, they reply, "He will bring those wretches to a wretched end and he will rent the vineyard to other tenants, who will give him his share of the crop at harvest time." That's the very danger Israel's leaders were in as they continued in the tradition of rejecting God's messengers and so rejecting God's claim on them. Their rejection of Jesus would mean that God's kingdom would be offered to other people. Patient as God is, kind as God is, rejecting God doesn't go unanswered forever.

Jesus goes on to quote Psalm 118:22-23, "The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; the Lord has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes." Jesus comments that whoever falls on this stone will be broken to pieces and if the stone falls on someone they will be crushed. So the rejected son in the parable is the rejected stone in the Scripture. Jesus is the stone that was rejected but that turned out to be the most important stone in the building. Jesus is the cornerstone, or the

capstone, of the people of God. "Jesus is the foundation stone on which everything is built, and the cornerstone which holds everything together. To refuse his way is to batter one's head against the walls of the law of God. To defy him is in the end to be crushed out of life" (William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew*, vol 2, *Daily Study Bible*).

Many years before Jesus told this parable, a king had a dream. He wouldn't tell his councilors what it was but demanded that they interpret it. They couldn't do that. But Daniel could. Daniel saw that the king had dreamed of a huge statue: its head was made of gold, its chest and arms of silver, its belly and thighs of bronze, its legs of iron, and its feet of a mixture of iron and clay. Then there came a stone that struck the statue on its feet and smashed them. The whole statue came crashing down and was broken into pieces. But the stone became a great mountain and filled the whole earth.

Daniel's interpretation of the king's dream lived on in the memory of the Jews from that day to the time of Jesus and beyond. It was all about the kingdoms of the world and the kingdom of God.

The various parts of the statue represented successive kingdoms of the world. Each was less glorious than the one before. The Stone would destroy the last kingdom then grow to become a new kind of kingdom, ruling the world in a new way (Daniel 2). The Jews of Jesus' day thought that the various kingdoms had passed. "The Stone, they thought, meant God's Messiah, who would set up the kingdom of God by destroying the world's kingdoms and starting something quite new" (N. T. Wright, *Matthew for Everyone*, vol 2).

The rejected son of the parable is the rejected stone of the psalm. Jesus was being rejected by those entrusted with the vineyard of Israel. But his death would lead to resurrection and the rejected stone would become the cornerstone of the whole building. The rejected stone is the stone of God's kingdom. It destroys all who reject and resist it. It breaks and heals and builds up all who welcome it.

In this whole scene we see God's chosen people, entrusted with God's work in the world, becoming possessive and refusing to give God what he

expects from them. Therefore, the kingdom and the work of the kingdom are taken from them.

By the time Jesus finished talking about the kingdom being taken away from them and about the crushing stone, the chief priests and Pharisees knew he was talking about them. If we're listening, we realize that Jesus is talking about us too.

There are several companies that publish personalized children's books. They make it possible to put your child in the story. One company is called "Me Books" (<http://www.madeinme.com/me-books/>). The Bible is certainly God's book, but in a way it's a "me book" isn't it? One reason we see the Bible as the Word of God is that it knows us so well and shows us ourselves so accurately.

Let's see ourselves in this story Jesus tells. What's the vineyard for us? What's been entrusted to us that we've decided to take possession of? Is it our life, our plans, our future? Maybe it's a loved one. It could be our image, our career, our church. Could it be our investments, the signs of our success, what we've worked so hard for? How do we feel when God comes to claim ownership of all that?

Dutch scholar and leader Abraham Kuyper said, "There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry: 'Mine!'" (<https://thechristianscholar.wordpress.com/2014/07/20/lets-read-keller-8-abraham-kuyper>, accessed 3/7/17).

The apostle Paul reminds us, "You are not your own; you were bought at a price" (1 Corinthians 6:19-20).

But we start acting like the vineyard is ours. We don't want anybody, including God, to threaten our self-management. Lloyd Ogilvie writes about this:

I cannot read this parable honestly without thinking about the ways we act like the vine growers—as individuals and as the church. As the people of God we are responsible to the Lord for what we do with what He has entrusted to us. How often has the Son come to claim us and been rejected, stoned and beaten in our church systems,

neglected in our culturalized religion and domesticated in our irrelevant piety? (*The Autobiography of God* 277)

We can repent, we can change. Fred Craddock tells about a man he knew in a church in the Midwest. Fred had done Bible studies and preached in this church many times. Fred says the man was a grumpy sort. A controlling man who acted like he was in the background but really controlled his family, his kids, his grandkids, the church. Once when Fred was back there, he ran into the man. He says he saw him coming, but there was nowhere to go. So he shook hands with him and asked, "How're you doing?"

He said, "I'm doing all right."

Fred says there was something different about him. He said, "How's the church?"

The man said, "Better than we've ever been. God is at work in our church."

Fred had never heard him say anything like that, had only heard him criticize. He replied, "That's wonderful."

"We're in better shape spiritually and in every way than we've ever been in my memory."

"That's wonderful! Who's your minister?"

He said, "We have a woman," but didn't give her name.

Fred said, "You do?"

"Yeah. I was against her, but I was wrong. I was wrong in my estimation of women. If I was wrong about her, I was probably wrong about a lot of other stuff."

Fred concludes: "Isn't that great? Finally, he met the gospel, broke the pattern, and he was making a new way" (*Craddock Stories* 121).

Jesus' parable keeps speaking to God's people—to us. It speaks of God's trust in us, of God's patience and kindness, and of God's judgment. It speaks of our privilege and responsibility: God has given us so much. It also speaks of our sin—possessiveness, greed, selfishness.

But it also speaks of the claim of Jesus and the sacrifice of Jesus that makes all the difference. Dr. George Harley and his wife, Winifred, went as

medical missionaries to Liberia in 1926. After preparation and training, they felt called to establish a mission station in the interior rather than staying in the city on the coast. They made a difficult journey through the jungle 150 miles inland to the village of Ganta. Once there, the residents helped them build several huts. One was a medical dispensary, one a chapel, another their home. Soon after they arrived, Winifred gave birth to their first child, a boy they called Bobby.

Sick people came to Ganta to be treated. But although the people received Harley's medical help gladly, they were reluctant to receive the gospel or accept the Christian faith. For nearly five years, no one came to the chapel for worship. Only Winifred and Bobby came to the services George led

One day when Bobby was almost five years old, George looked out the window and saw him running but he fell down. He got up and ran and fell again. This time he didn't get up. George ran and picked up his feverish little boy. He said, "Bobby, don't worry. Your daddy knows how to treat that tropical fever. He's going to help you get better." He tried every treatment he knew, but some days later Bobby died.

George made a little coffin and they laid Bobby in it. He started to carry the coffin to a clearing where they would find a spot to bury him. As they passed the village, an old man asked, "What are you doing? Where are you going with that box?"

George said, "My son has died. I'm going to bury him."

The man said, "I'll help you." And they carried the coffin to the clearing. They dug a grave and laid Bobby in it. But when they had covered up the grave, George couldn't stand it any longer. His grief was intense, his heart was breaking. He fell to his knees in the dirt and started sobbing uncontrollably. Their beloved son was dead and they were 8000 miles from home.

But when he started crying, the old man from the village looked amazed. He squatted down next to George and looked at him intently. For a long time, he listened to him cry. Then he jumped up and ran back to the village screaming, "White man, white man—he cries like one of us!"

The Harleys were so broken, they were ready to leave Ganta and return home. But that night there was a knock at their door. There stood the chief and nearly every person in the village. The next Sunday morning, the chapel was filled and many stood outside looking in the windows. They wanted to hear the gospel, to learn about Jesus.

A friend listening to George Harley tell that story, said, "What troubles me is that you had to give up your son to break through to the people." (Stephen Seamands, *Give Them Christ* 38-40; Joe Harding, *Have I Told You Lately?* 136-37;

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George_Way_Harley, accessed 3/10/17).

Jesus is the Son God sends to gather fruit. Jesus is the cornerstone that God builds his house on. Everything depends on how we respond to Jesus. "Disciples submit to Jesus decisively and then extend the invitation to anyone we find" (John Hiigel, *Partnering with the King* 208).

God says, "I will send my Son. Maybe they'll respect him."

God's love is unlimited. There's no failure, no sin, no arrogant demand to run the vineyard ourselves that God won't forgive if we ask him. As long as we live, there's a new chance to welcome God into the vineyard and say, "Lord, this is your vineyard. It's never belonged to me even though I've acted like it did. Forgive me. Thank you for your persistence and all the overtures of love I've rejected." Can you say that about your life? Your family? Your church? God's response is gracious but firm: "You belong to me. Let's enjoy the vineyard together" (Ogilvie 279).