Sermon preached at St. John's Episcopal Church, West Hartford, CT
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Proper 22, Year A
October 4, 2020

The violence in this week's gospel shocks me. Every time I hear this parable, and a few others, the bloodshed makes me want to turn the page and skip to a better part, to a healing, or the time Jesus changed the water into wine. I like that part. Instead of a wedding feast or healing or a story about sheep, we must endure a parable about murderous tenants. Yikes.

The thing is, the stories we tell reflect the realities of our existence, so it's no wonder that the gospels have violent bits. Violence is a part of the gospels because violence was knit into the fabric of life for Jews and early Christians in Roman-occupied Palestine. It reflects a brutal world, the lived experience of an oppressed people. So for those of us turned off by today's story, it is a privilege to be shocked or sickened by the violence; it means that violence does not haunt us in the same way it haunts those original hearers of the Good News. It is a privilege that my life is not full of violence and threats of violence. I feel safe in my community, protected by the people sworn to protect me, far away from the sort of pain and terror that affect different communities even today. Far away from the sort of violence that was all too normal for those first generations of Jesus followers way back when. Far away from the violence that still shapes and disrupts communities around the world and right here in America.

As with nearly everything in the gospels, if it makes me uncomfortable, I need to sit with it. I need to do the work of understanding how God is speaking to me, right here, in my struggle. My issue is that violence is antithetical to the God I love. God is love. Jesus tells us to love our enemies, to turn the other cheek. So what do we make of violence in a book that is supposed to be about love? What do we do with it?

Well, first we remember that the evangelists- the writers of the gospels- were writing stories of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus for their communities. What we read is filtered through human lives, human communities, and these communities were under constant threat of violence from their Roman oppressors and, to a lesser extent, from the Jewish authorities who were not keen on this Jesus fellow or his followers. In that frightening context, something kind of amazing happens. Isn't it amazing that Jesus managed to eschew violence in a violent world? Isn't it amazing that Jesus embodied love in a world that prioritized other things? Isn't it amazing that self-sacrificial, non-violent, world-redeeming love can come from such a time and place?

The violence of this story, and others in the gospel, stands in direct contrast with Jesus' life of nonviolence and his ultimate act of nonviolence on the cross. In a world filled with brutality, Jesus does not fight back. He calls on Peter to drop his sword in the garden. He forgives his own executioners. His love, his real, gritty, life-giving love, is enough to overpower violence and death. The cross is a violent way to die, and in Jesus it becomes a blessing, the source of life everlasting, the source of our salvation. In dying on the cross, submitting himself to the violence of the world, Jesus *conquers* violence and death, strips them of their power.

This tension between violence and non-violence is at play in today's parable. The tenants are violent; they kill the landowner's servants and even his own son. But the landowner? He is nonviolent— absurdly nonviolent, absurdly merciful. When the tenants beat the first servant, he sends another, and then another. This is not how the powers of this world would have handled it. And when they have beaten, stoned, and killed three servants in a row, he sends his own child to reason with them. His mercy is illogical, so I invite us to sit with it for a moment. In this violent parable, the landowner lives by different rules: merciful rules, rules that seem to hope for the best in others. He could respond with violence and be within the law, but instead he responds with mercy. It is important to note that at the end of the parable, when Jesus asks what should be done, it

is not the landowner but the audience— the scribes and pharisees— who suggest violence against the tenants. They say, “He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and lease the vineyard to other tenants.” Their answer follows the rules of a violent, dangerous world, but it does not follow the character of the landowner.

What are we to make of this parable? God is the landowner, I think that much is clear. The servants are the prophets, the son is Jesus. The trouble is what to do with the tenants, and what to do with the vineyard itself. It could be read that the vineyard is Israel, and the tenants are the scribes and pharisees, the temple elite of Jesus’ time. In a narrow sense that may be true, but there is a danger in stopping at this point. This sort of rhetoric has fueled antisemitism for centuries, pitting the wicked Jewish tenants against the good, fruit-bearing Christians. It also takes all pressure of us Christians. We get to read the parable without feeling convicted, knowing that Jesus is patting us on the head and praising us for our good works.

That just seems too simplistic. Parables are meant to challenge us, meant to upend the way we think the world works so that we can catch a glimpse of God’s dream for us and, with God’s grace, conform our lives more closely to Jesus. The issue is the tenants’ perverted idea that somehow they have the right to everything in the vineyard, even though they did not plant the vines, did not build the fence, or the wine press, or the watchtower. The tenants take and coopt what was never theirs. They want to own, to control, and they use violent means to get it. The parable isn’t an indictment of a religion but of religiosity and possessiveness. The temple elite have coopted God’s amazing gift— a covenant relationship with God— and have used it to exclude and wield power. When the prophets called out the powerful of Israel over the centuries, they were reviled, rebuffed, and even killed. Just think of John the Baptist, who was arrested and beheaded not by Rome but by Herod.

In this reading of the parable, we do not get to sit and listen in comfort. This is not just a warning to the scribes and pharisees, but to all of us. How often do we coopt what is not really our own? How often do we seek to control God's grace and abundance instead of giving it freely? For us it's not a vineyard, but perhaps mercy. Love. Hope. Wealth. Privilege. We are stewards in God's vineyard, and we are good stewards insofar as we give it back to God and the least among us. Whom do we tend to exclude? Who is at the margins? If we are going to be worthy tenants, we must first acknowledge that all good gifts come from God, and then work to increase them not for our own personal gain but towards God's dream of compassion, mercy, and justice for *all* of God's children.

The parable reminds us that God will always find a way to advance God's kingdom. The landowner creates the opportunity for bearing fruit. He plants the vineyard and builds the fence and the wine press, and it's up to the workers to lovingly tend the vines, harvest the fruits, and then give back the bounty. It is God's Church, God's mission, God's dream for reconciliation, repentance, and new creation. God invites us to participate. When we bear fruit, when we treat the fruits of our labors not as something to guard and hoard but instead as the rightful property of the God who made us and saves us and empowers us for love, *then* can we call ourselves stewards of God's vineyard. So, let us go and bear fruit; let us grow love, and mercy, and justice; and let us share them with each and every person we meet, since each and every one of us is made in the loving image of God. AMEN.