

October 8, 2017
27th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Ex. 20:1-20; Matt. 21:33-46

CHOOSE THE CORNERSTONE

After waking up Monday morning to the news of yet another senseless mass shooting, I'm sure we all want to hear words of encouragement and hope. When I first looked at the Gospel lesson for this week, I thought maybe we should just skip it. It is a parable about unadulterated human evil. But as I dug into it, I realized that it is precisely because of that that it is exactly what we need to hear this morning. As is always the case when we study the Gospel, in the end it is indeed a message of encouragement and hope.

The parable is an allegory. The land owner is God. The land owner's slaves are the prophets of old sent by God to the privileged leaders and rulers of Israel. The privileged leaders and rulers of Israel are the tenants. The vineyard is ancient Israel—the promised land that had been entrusted to them by God. Over and over the prophets warned the privileged class that oppression of the poor, the widows, the orphans, and the foreigners and outsiders among them would bring about the demise of the nation. Over and over the prophets were rejected, in fact punished for their words of truth and warning.

Over and over again, the tenants are given opportunity to give God what belongs to God to begin with. Over and over again the tenants fail to recognize their place in relationship to God. They are the tenants, he is the owner. But God refuses to give up, sending finally the Son in hopes that that will evoke the proper response from the tenants. But even the Son they kill. Nothing will turn the hearts of the tenants who are determined to take what does not belong to them.

When Jesus asks the religious leaders what will happen to the tenants, they don't have to stop and think about it. The evil-doers will be killed by the owner and the vineyard will be given to others. Then Jesus is quoting Isaiah when he says

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

The religious leaders *know* Jesus is talking about them. They *know* so well that their own sacred Scriptures indict them. And yet, even in that knowledge they do what the wicked tenants do: They plot to kill the Son.

Nothing will turn the hearts of tenants determined to take what does not belong to them. Nothing is more important to them than money, land, power and authority and they will do whatever it takes to seize and keep what they believe they are entitled to.

So, the Scribes, chief priests, and Pharisees (in our time, the religious and political leaders) are the tenants in the parable. But what about the others who hear it? What about the crowds that include the poor and afflicted, the questioning and the seeking, those on the margins, afraid they won't be accepted?

And what about the disciples? How do they hear this disturbing word? What about us? Who are we in these verses? Pharisees and chief priests? Disciples? Members of the crowd? What is the word of the Lord for us in this story that feels as if it could have been ripped out of current, tragic events of murder and mayhem?

Let's leave that question for now. First, let's be clear about who we are not. No matter if we are Pharisees, crowd members or disciples, we are not the land owner and we are not the son. The vineyard, so lovingly created and entrusted to the tenants, does not belong to us any more than it belonged to them. We don't own anything on this earth. It's all on loan, leased to us for a period of time by the almighty creator. Like the tenants, we are all obligated to be good stewards of all that we receive.

No matter who the tenants are, where the land is or the point in history we're talking about, if they occupy the land long enough, tenants will start to feel entitled to it. They will decide who can live on it and who can't, who can be excluded and

who can be welcomed. They decide they and only they are entitled to the fruit and the profits the land produces. They refuse to share the land or the harvest.

But the earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, and God is going to call us to account for how we have tended to the vineyards that have been entrusted to us. That is lesson number one.

Lesson number two is that God's law is to be followed. Jesus came to fulfill the law, not abolish it. Hence, we are still held accountable even after we disobey what God has commanded. The tenants in this parable disregard the law. They kill, they steal, they covet, they are idolaters who place their love of wealth and power above their love of God.

Those among us who accept Jesus Christ as Lord, commit to an expansive, generous, selfless understanding of God's law. We are not permitted to water it down with rationalizations: Well, we can't feed all the hungry people in the world, we have to keep America first. Well, we have to keep our borders secure, we can't just let everybody in. Well, it's impossible to prevent deranged people from committing mass murder, so there's no point in looking for ways to limit it.

John Calvin said that the Ten Commandments –God's law—includes not only the expressed requirements or prohibitions, but also what they imply. He says it isn't enough to refrain from worshipping false idols. If we really want to keep the first commandment (you shall have no other gods before me), we must put our love of, and obedience to God above all other thoughts, concerns and endeavors. Remember. Love God with your whole heart.

And if we want to keep the eighth commandment ("You shall not steal"), we may not funnel or otherwise surreptitiously keep for ourselves what rightfully belongs to God. We are always to have the goal of including and sharing. Working to produce the best fruit, not for ourselves but for God.

In other words, not only do we not kill, covet and steal, we share our abundance and we work for the landowner, the fellow tenant and the outsider alike.

No matter who we are in this story - Pharisee, disciple or crowd member - the vineyard does not belong to us. All we have is on loan. We are entrusted with its care and obligated to turn over its bounty to the one who planted it and invested in it; the one who gives the tenants every opportunity to produce good fruit.

No matter who we are in the story - Pharisee, disciple or crowd - we need to recognize that often we fail to hear and heed God's message and God's messengers. We seek any means possible to silence the Word that calls us away from our comfort zone and into a place of submission to God's law.

No matter who we are in the story - Pharisee, disciple or crowd - Jesus is talking to us, at times about us, and how we respond to his word will determine if he will be for us a stumbling block or our chief cornerstone. It's up to us. If we choose him, we won't stumble and won't be crushed by the cornerstone. We will be lifted up by it and there will find security, fulfillment and peace of mind and spirit. We are free to choose him. Alleluia. Amen.