

Mark Twain once said:

"Explaining humor is a lot like dissecting a frog.
You learn a lot in the process,
but in the end you kill it."

Preaching a parable of Jesus
is a lot like dissecting a frog.

I could dissect the parable of the Wicked Tenants
by explaining it away as a simple allegory
of the historical relationship of God and Israel.
The landowner is God; the vineyard, Israel.
The messenger-servants are the prophets,
like Jeremiah who flogged and put in the stocks.
Time and again, the Israelites are given a chance
to return the first-fruits of God's field back to God.
Time and again, God refuses to give up on the people,
eventually sending God's own Son.

While I'm in good company
with an allegorical approach,
I've decided to preach the parable emotionally,
not rationally.

Parables are earthy stories located in practical life.
The scenery, the characters, the customs
are the stuff of actual lived experiences,
though the setting may be a little unfamiliar.
The genius of Jesus' parables is in the way that
the Transcendent Divine is 'thrown beside'
(para-bolé) the Practical Earthly.

I would like to retell the Wicked Tenants parable
by episodes and explore my reaction to it.
In retelling the story, I do not expect that
we will react with total understanding
of the relationship of God with humankind.
But we will react with AN understanding of it.
I will switch around with different translations,
so that the words don't sound so familiar.

I'll be using Eugene Peterson's "The Message" [MSG],
the New Living Translation (2014) [NLT],
and the Common English Bible (2011) [CEB].

From The Message:

October 8, 2017

"Here's a story. Listen closely."

There was once a man, a wealthy farmer,
who planted a vineyard. He fenced it,
dug a winepress, put up a watchtower,
then turned it over to the farmhands
and went off on a trip."

The original hearers of Matthew's gospel are just folks,
no more familiar with wine growing than most of us.
But everyone in Jesus' day,
has heard of absentee landowners,
capitalists who develop a plot of ground
and sip umbrella drinks while the profits roll in.
Landowners expect tenants to pay a hefty portion
of each harvest, sometimes such a large portion
that it leaves barely enough
for the tenant farmers to subsist on.

So as one of the original listeners,
I would have some honest emotional reactions.
First of all, I suppose I would feel some envy
at this man's wealth and his industriousness.
It's all I can do to put up curtains in my windows.
And I would imagine that he's prudent.
He builds a fence and tower
to protect his investment.
He's in this for the long haul.

I could quibble about the lack of security cameras,
but every entrepreneur eventually has to trust
the people she or he hires.

This owner, feeling so sure of the enterprise,
turns away from it and goes on a trip. Hmm.

The parable continues in the New Living Translation:

"At the time of the grape harvest,
he sent his servants to collect his share of the crop."

I am not expecting this turn of events, exactly.
The owner apparently is confident enough
about the amount of the harvest
(or alternatively, cares so little about the harvest)
that he doesn't come in person.

My first reaction is to put myself
 in the place of those underlings the owner sends.
 They are making the first contact
 by anyone in authority
 since the tenants were hired to tend the vines.
 It's putting a lot of faith in the underlings.
 What if the harvest has failed?
 Will the owner believe them?
 What if the harvest is so abundant
 that they can't carry the owner's share back to him?
 Can they get more pickup trucks?
 Taken together, the first two parts of the story –
 setting up the enterprise
 and collecting the first fruits –
 suggest a land-master who has a lot going on
 and delegates tremendous responsibilities.
 Jesus, is that your idea
 of God's place in human history?
 Jesus continues:
 “The farmhands grabbed the first servant
 and beat him up. The next one they murdered.
 They threw stones at the third
 but he got away.” [MSG]
 [Gasp!] This has gotten ugly, fast!
 The bucolic scene I have pictured in my mind so far
 is spattered with blood.
 Why weren't there cameras on site? Call in CSI.
 So what did the owner know about the tenants
 and when did he know it?
 I'm less sympathetic with the owner now.
 My instinct that it was risky business to send staff
 to make the first contact is right.
 I would never accept such a job.
 But then – I ponder for a moment and ask myself,
 “Have I already accepted such a job?”
 By professing my faith in God, haven't I agreed
 to act as God's emissary to collect God's harvest?
 I seldom think about living my faith as risky.
 But there are Christians in the Middle East that do.

October 8, 2017

Ocean View Presbyterian Church

“Again he sent other servants,
 more than the first group.
 The tenants treated them in the same way.
 Finally he sent his son to them.
 ‘They will respect my son,’ he said.” [CEB]
 More than once in my pre-ministry career,
 I was dispatched from the head office
 to a field location to find out what was going on,
 from a personnel perspective.
 There was a certain amount of prestige – yet risk –
 tackling sensitive employment matters.
 I always had self-doubts.
 Far-off field offices don't like head-office snoops.
 They get used to hands-off management.
 It is easy to ignore company training programs
 and policies, and go on, business as usual.
 Too often I filed a report, Situation Unresolved,
 because the field office shot me, the messenger.
 It was hard for me to explore the depth of a situation
 in just one visit.
 What's going on with the tenants in the parable?
 Is this justifiable job action over unfair rents?
 Or are they just unruly thugs?
 Rev. Jill Duffield has written this week:
 No matter who these tenants are,
 if they occupy the land long enough
 they will start to feel entitled to it.
 They don't want to give up the land or the harvest.
 They do whatever it takes to maintain
 what isn't theirs to begin with.
 Is the landowner naïve to be so persistent?
 Or crazy to sustain such a business relationship?
 “But when the farmhands saw the son arrive,
 they rubbed their hands in greed.
 ‘This is the heir! Let's kill him
 and have it all for ourselves.’
 They grabbed him, threw him out,
 and killed him.” [MSG]
 I could see that coming, couldn't you?

Rev. Gerald Egger

So there really were security cameras in the yard, because they took their dirty business outside. They're not only ruthless, they're also stupid. What makes them think they can hold onto land that belonged to their murder victim? Given that the owner hasn't shown up for a while, it's still stupidly selfish to think that the owner would quietly give up his investment. Stupid selfishness, of course, is always with us. Images of “stupid thinking” are all over the place: We assume we are taking the nobler path when we avoid telling a close friend an unwelcome but important truth, to spare their feelings. Gun-rights advocates urge every law-abiding citizen to arm themselves, arguing that it will save lives. Parents raised in the Depression of the 30s indulge their baby-boomer children. A president decrees “America First,” as though Americans are not selfish enough already. An Italian-born economist and professor at Berkeley, Carlos Cipolla, postulated [5 Laws of Human Stupidity](#). Law No. 3 states that it is stupid to cause losses to another person or to a group while personally deriving no gain, and even incurring personal losses. That law convicts the Wicked Tenants as stupid. Yet are we, citizens of planet Earth, any different from those greedy tenants? We are only short-term renters of God's abundance. Yet we act like we own the place. The artfulness of Jesus' parables is they pack drama into tight little packages. It's been about 160 words so far. But the reading changes tone at this point.

“When the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenant farmers?” [CEB]

Jesus says, “When” the owner comes, not “If.”

So! The unruly tenants are to be held accountable after all.

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Jesus invites his audience – the chief priests and Pharisees – to give their interpretation of the parable. “What will the owner do to those tenants?” I'm going to use my own translation of their answer, because the Greek is pretty colorful:

They said to him,
he will ruin those no-good evil ones,
and lease the vineyard to other tenants
who will fill their end of the bargain
in due season.

This is self-condemning for the religious leaders. Jewish religious leaders regard themselves as Custodians of the Faith.

They squirm with recognition that they themselves are the wicked tenants. Frankly, this also makes me as a pastor squirm, because I have answered the call to be a Custodian of the Faith.

If you accept the notion, as I do, of the priesthood of all believers, you're custodians of the faith, too. Have I gotten your attention?

Jesus says to them, and to us:

Therefore, I tell you that God's kingdom will be taken away from you and will be given to a people who produce its fruit. [CEB]

The bottom-line implication is clear: God can find someone else to tend the kingdom, someone more trustworthy.

As a pastor I am accountable to God, whether I think God checks up on me or not. God trusts me to produce a harvest of souls. God will ruin me if I cheat and will replace me if I fail.

God holds me accountable for God's kingdom. That, believe it or not, is part of the Good News of this parable.

No absentee landlord, no naïve negotiator,
 God has sent the beloved Son,
 who was killed by our forebears in the faith,
 and who was raised from death
 to call us to account.

In other words, God cares about the Kingdom.

Now when the chief priests and the Pharisees
 heard the parable,

they knew Jesus was talking about them. [NLT]

Here’s my reaction:

Since we all are Custodians of the Faith,
 like the priests and Pharisees,
 God expects us to be accountable –
 congregation to Session, Session to Pastor,
 Pastor to Presbytery; and ultimately all to God.
 It’s what we signed on for.

God has bequeathed to us a fertile vineyard.

It’s ours to work, to the glory of God. Good News!

CONCLUSION

I hope that this parable’s heart is still beating
 on your mental dissection table.

The parables are timeless stories
 that reinvent themselves with each telling.

It has been said that Jesus, while telling parables,
 also lived one.

Ultimately what he ‘threw alongside’
 the Transcendent Divine was the Practical Earthly
 of his own life and ministry.

His life – traveling, healing, preaching, and dining –
 is an embodied parable.

The parables Jesus tells are provocative, even today.

The bits and pieces of his parables
 are the stuff of actual lived experience,
 even if the situations are a little unfamiliar to us.

They still tear down our pre-conceptions of morality.

They still skewer human pride.

They still expose corrupt systems.

They still stretch our hearts, and minds, and souls.

May it ever be so. Amen.

The Affirmation of Faith is an excerpt from
 the Confession of Belhar, originating in
 the Republic of South Africa and recently added
 to the PC(USA) Book of Confessions:

**We believe that God
 brings justice to the oppressed
 and gives bread to the hungry.
 We believe that God frees the prisoner
 and restores sight to the blind.
 We believe that God
 supports the downtrodden,
 protects the stranger,
 helps orphans and widows,
 and blocks the path of the ungodly.**