

Seventeenth Sunday After Pentecost - Elise Cranston  
October 5, 2014

Matthew 21:33–46

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of OUR hearts be acceptable and pleasing in your sight O Lord, our Rock, and our redeemer. Amen.*

I spent last spring semester in Costa Rica and Nicaragua; it was the most formative and influential experience of my life. I also gained some crazy awesome stories about eating raw meat (although I am a vegetarian), outrageous digestive “adventures” so to speak, doing Zumba in a park with 100 women, and repeatedly singing the theme song from the movie “Frozen” with my host mom. But more importantly, through this new culture and people I was opened to a world I had never known. Ay dios mio, it was both wonderful and depressing. Books, articles, songs, interviews, and the lips of real people all told me the same story of cinco siglos igual—five centuries of the oppression of a nation. It was the story of front-of-the-line people taking advantage and exploiting the back-of-the-line people, to borrow a phrase from Lucia a few weeks ago.

Fortunately, even in the midst of culture shock and readjusting to life in the States I couldn't shake what I learned; experiences like this change the way we see the world and read the Bible. So as I prepared for this sermon and read commentary after commentary explaining that this parable was as an allegory in which God is the landowner, I was distraught. This explanation didn't sit well with my recent experiences. I thought of the people I met in Central America and especially my family in Nicaragua and wondered, how could a people who have been abused and exploited by landowners for centuries understand and see as God a landowner? Isn't God supposed to set us free from the oppressor, not be the oppressor? Why would Jesus tell this parable in which God takes the role that so many Latin Americans have come to despise?

Jesus' good news this morning took a bit of digging into our parable, but it is there. Today I would like to offer a different reading of this parable, perhaps not a better interpretation, but a more inclusive one. Today Jesus proclaims good news for all but especially the poor and it is this: the vineyard will no longer be governed by those who abuse power, but by a people who will live into the fruits of God's kingdom.

Given their history I knew that it wouldn't make any sense for most Latin Americans to have God allegorized as a landowner, but I wondered if the same could be said in Jesus' context. This led me to question, what was happening in Galilee during Jesus' life? What was the socioeconomic context into which Jesus was telling this parable? Would the crowds have thought the same thing as my friends in Latin America? These questions take us back a few centuries into the world of Jesus.

Palestine was a part of the Roman Empire, under the domination of a “peace” imposed by a foreign empire—the PAX ROMANA. Peasants in a patriarchal society marked this domination system. Today for our parable it is particularly important to understand the peasant society of Palestine.

Palestinian society in Jesus's day entailed a huge gulf between the wealthy and peasant class. Ninety percent of the population were peasants and ten percent were ruling elites. Peasant agriculture was the only real source of income, but the ruling elites extracted sixty-six percent of the rural production through taxation and land rent. There was widespread poverty and hunger among the ninety percent of peasants leading to a precarious existence. For peasants society was politically oppressive, economically exploitative, and religiously legitimated.

The situation within this parable was a familiar one. Horsley, the author of a book titled *Galilee*, explains that in Jesus' era it was typical for the wealthy to have huge estates of land that were worked, farmed, and cared for by the tenants. Horsley explains: "the principal way in which wealthy figures would have come into control of a large amount of land with tenant producers was through using their official positions to exploit the indebtedness of the peasants." Peasants were often in debt and owed taxes to their ruler, so while they were not forced into slavery for the wealthy, within their society they often had no other choices for work. Exploitation through agriculture and land was a normal part of life.

William Herzog writes: "Properties were typically created through the expropriation of peasant lands by wealthy landowners." Therefore, the seemingly mundane opening lines of this parable are important details, because the process implies a class conflict. During this time the power of the elites was centralized in their ability to redistribute land, which always turned the peasants into landless tenants.

Furthermore, the gospels clue us in to the fact that the crowds following Jesus have characteristics that cast them into a part of peasant society. They were unemployed—following Jesus around all day—hungry—remember, Jesus fed the 5,000 who were without food—and looking for a leader. Due to impoverished economics, these crowds would also have had negative associations with landowners, because they were the abused tenants.

It seems that Palestine in Jesus' day and the countries of Latin America have a lot more in common than one would imagine. The distance in their geographical locations doesn't change their histories. Clearly in both locations it was familiar and typical for the wealthy elite to take advantage of the peasants and exploit them through land.

So in spite of this research, I was stuck in the same place as before: if this parable really were an allegory, why would Jesus cast God as the known oppressor? The poor in Galilee had experienced continuous exploitation and oppression at the hands of landowners—how could this character represent God? All this led me to question the exclusive reading of this parable as an allegory, and I was furious that every North American commentary was telling me the same thing.

But historical context can only take us so far. While history can outline the socioeconomic situations typical in peasant society, the literary context of the gospel of Matthew colors in those lines for us. This parable shows up in Mark, Luke, and even the gospel of Thomas, but there are distinct aspects of Matthew's account that clue us into this parable's unique message for a particular audience.

Significantly, the context of this parable's placement in Matthew reveals that at this point Jesus' audience was not his typical crowds of peasants. This parable is told promptly after Jesus' triumphal entry, which means the gospel narrative is nearing the passion narrative, and this means the Pharisees and chief priests are closing in on Jesus.

Then it clicked, Jesus wasn't addressing the poor, but the elite with this parable. The Pharisees are Jesus' audience! It makes perfect sense to cast God as the landowner, for this audience would have no negative associations of exploitation by landowners. In fact, they associate themselves with powerful and violent landowners when they respond, "He will put those wretches to a miserable death." However, the Pharisees are not the landowners in this parable, but the tenants. Clearly the tenants in this story are not disempowered peasants—rather they are powerful, self-absorbed and abusive keepers of the vineyard of Israel...the Pharisees.

More literary context reveals that the parable of the tenants is the centerpiece for Jesus' threefold parabolic response to the chief priests and Pharisees. It is bracketed by the parable of the two sons right before it, and the parable of the wedding banquet, which follows. Commentaries agree on this: all three of these parables are addressed to the Pharisees and chief priests. Jesus' intentions become clearer; all three of these parables direct specific messages to those at the front of the line.

Another important literary note is that Matthew is the only gospel in which Jesus specifically says that the kingdom will be given to *those who render fruits*. The other gospels simply declare that the vineyard will be given to "others." Matthew's account of Jesus' address to the Pharisees and chief priest unfolds a specific message to the powerful: if you do not bear the fruit of the kingdom, the vineyard will be taken from you, and given to those who will.

Matthew's gospel often speaks of "fruits" or "bearing fruit." Fruit is Matthew's favorite metaphor for walking in the way of Jesus and doing as Jesus did. Throughout this gospel Jesus is showing us how to bear fruit. Following Jesus requires an affirmation of the dignity and value of each person; this fruit is lived out through opposition to exploitation and to corruption of the poor. Jesus' good news this morning is that the vineyard has been taken from the powerful who only look out for themselves, and given to those who will bear the fruit of the Kingdom.

When Jesus asks the Pharisees what the landowner will do to the keepers, their answer is self-incriminating, but entirely expected. They assume a response of vengeance and violence, saying "He (the landowner) will put those wretches to a miserable death, and lease the vineyards to other tenants who will give him the produce at harvest time." The Pharisees show their own assumptions in this statement, casting God as the typical oppressive, powerful, and vengeful landowner of the day. While Jesus does not reinforce the violent response of the Pharisees, he does agree with the latter part of their statement that, "The kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom." Jesus offers a response of God's restoration for the vineyard. Jesus doesn't play into the Pharisees incorrect notion of God; instead Jesus' answer declares a restorative God who isn't interested in a power play but rather in the ultimate good of the vineyard.

Jesus told this parable to the front-of-the-line people, so the question for St. Paul's this morning is, where do we land in the story? Even though we aren't in Latin America or Galilee we still face a huge wealthy disparity today. We are all familiar with the reality of the ninety-nine percent vs. one percent. Although we do not represent the one percent of our society, at the same time I wonder if we deeply understand the extent of our privileges in society, perhaps most specifically our white privilege. As educated, affluent by the world's standards, and mostly from the dominant culture, we are the people of power in our current world, and especially within our own Greenville community. We would be foolish to exclude ourselves from the Pharisees, so then we must ask ourselves: how will we use the power we have? Will we be the ones from whom the kingdom is taken? Will we be the ones who say the right words, but in the end don't do the task at hand as in the parable of the two sons that precedes this one? Or will we work to produce the fruits of God's kingdom, fruits of loving those whom society rejects—fruits of protecting the dignity of all? Are we walking in the way of Jesus, caring for the poor, oppressed, homeless, and hungry of Greenville?

We must ask ourselves, how often on a day-to-day basis do our lives intersect with the back-of-the-line people of Greenville? People in our own church have shown us that bearing kingdom fruit in Greenville could look like a lot of different things: volunteering at the prison, going to meet the kids at the Simple Room, sending your own kids to the Simple Room, working with the Set Free movement, going to the nursing home, tutoring, and spending time getting to know and care for those whom society rejects. Everyone's story is going to look different, but we are all called to tend the same vineyard. We are all called outside the Greenville College and St. Paul's bubble into the world to produce the fruits of the vineyard. May God give us courage and conviction to tend God's vineyard with love and grace, that God's kingdom may come on earth as it is in heaven. Amen.