

The Rev. Christine Love Mendoza
The Church of the Good Shepherd
The Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost –Sunday, October 4, 2020
Matthew 21:33-46

Almighty God, we ask that you grant us in this world knowledge of your truth, and in the next, life everlasting. Amen.

There once was a landowner who carefully cultivated a vineyard with all the proper structures to protect and preserve the harvest. This landowner then leases the vineyard to tenants to tend and steward it. Over time, the tenants became greedy and possessive of the vineyard and its bounty. And when the harvest came, they beat and killed the landowner's servants, and even his very own son, who had come to collect what was due, in order to claim it all for themselves. These tenants surely will be punished in kind and the vineyard given to other more honorable and trustworthy stewards.

If we understand this parable as pure allegory, in which each element correlates directly to something else, the message seems obvious, doesn't it? The landowner clearly is God; the vineyard is Israel; the tenants are the religious leaders of the time; and the landowner's slaves are the prophets. The landowner's son obviously is Jesus, who is the stone that the builders reject and yet becomes the cornerstone upon which God's kingdom will rest.

In other words, the chief priests and Pharisees, who have been entrusted to shepherd and steward God's chosen people of Israel, have violated this trust, rejected God's messengers, and killed God's Son and heir so that they may secure their claim of relationship with God and the attendant power that comes with this claim. God must have no alternative than to dispense with them in similar fashion and entrust Israel to new leaders.

This is how most of us usually interpret this well-known story. We should remember, however, that this story is a parable, not mere allegory and therefore understand that there is more going on here. And while this parable may sound like a straightforward allegory of sin and punishment, I hear a *different* story. Behind the moralized accusation and the prophetic call into relationship with the God Jesus calls, "Father", I hear a **love story of grace ever outpoured**.

What is shocking in this parable isn't really what the tenants do or don't do – for don't we all see and do this every day (in both little and big ways)? No, the surprising part is how the landowner responds. Rather than returning violence for violence, as we expect, the landowner responds to violence with grace. And so does God.

Instead of our relationship with God and God's care for us being based on a system of meritocracy, Jesus proposes a new way of understanding God's salvation mission: as one of unearned and underserved grace. It is to my constant amazement, and frequent disbelief, that despite our continual sin, violence, and greed, God offers not tit-for-tat punishment, but the continual gift of grace.

This message of grace, however, can be difficult to hear, given how we are used to understanding the parable. So, I would like to propose a different way of hearing the lesson: There once was a landowner who lovingly planted a vineyard and built a fence around it to keep out the animals that would otherwise devour the fruit and damage the vines. This landowner even dug a winepress and built a sturdy watchtower before he entrusted it to the care of his tenants.

The tenants worked the land with much diligence and labor, and brought in a good harvest. Now, in the course of time, the tenants became attached to the vineyard and the promises of security, esteem, and abundance that they felt it provided, in what was otherwise a precarious and frightening world.

One day, the landowner sent servants to collect the harvest. The servants came in peace but the tenants reacted in fear and greed. As fear often leads to violence, they captured the strangers and beat them viciously. The landowner, thinking that his tenants didn't realize that the people he sent were not thieves but authorized emissaries, gave them the benefit of the doubt and sent more servants. But the tenants reacted just as badly.

The landowner then thought: this *must* be a dreadful mistake, let me give them one more chance. And he sent his son – *surely* then they will recognize the authority of his son. But since fear builds upon fear, and violence seems to naturally escalate, the tenants reacted to the arrival of the son instead with murderous greed; killing the son and claiming his inheritance.

Listeners of this parable expect the landowner to return violence for violence, merited punishment for blatant sin. Jesus instead quotes from Isaiah: “The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord’s doing, and it is amazing in our eyes.” It seems that it is the will of the Lord that on the foundation of our sin, violence, and rejection, God builds his kingdom. That even though we reject God’s love, spur God’s will, and kill God’s gift of grace, God’s mission for his creation is one of continual restoration and ever outpouring of grace.

But, how can God return grace for sin? Love for violence? Salvation for fear? Life for death? How can God do this over and over again, no matter what dreadful things we do or what evil festers within our hearts? How can a righteous God continue to raise us up to further his work when we fall over and over again?

It just doesn't seem right. Unmerited grace makes us uncomfortable because we really like a good meritocracy, don't we? That makes sense to us – we know how to play that game. We feel reassured and some semblance of control in believing that “the punishment should fit the crime” and that “we get what we deserve.” This is especially true with rewards – that we are rewarded based upon our efforts and talent. I deserve it because I earned it, and the reward should be commensurate with the risk I took and the hard work I put into it. But, deep down, don't we all suspect that maybe this isn't the whole truth? Sometimes, we are rewarded in ways that are greater than our efforts. Sometimes, we are more lucky than deserving. Sometimes, it seems that love overruled the reasonable and appropriate allocation of favor.

If we wish to be truly honest, perhaps we will let ourselves face the truth that this system of meritocracy that we cling to is frequently an illusion. That is not to say that we haven't contributed significantly to our successes and rewards, but that our actions and contributions may not *always* be the defining point upon which reward and punishment is measured. God just doesn't seem to follow the rules of this game.

I am reminded of a prayer by Robert Farrar Capon, an Episcopal priest and author. And I suspect that if we would listen deeply to the frequent prayer of our hearts, it might sound a bit like this.

“Lord, please restore to us the comfort of merit and demerit. Show us that there is at least something we can do. Tell us that at the end of the day there will at least be one redeeming card of our very own. Lord, if it is not too much to ask, send us to bed with a few shreds of self-respect upon which we can congratulate ourselves. But whatever you do, do not preach grace. Give us something to do, anything; but spare us the indignity of this indiscriminate acceptance.”

This may be the secret prayer of our hearts, but unmerited grace abounds anyway. Favor, love, forgiveness, and mercy rain down on us all without discrimination. Those who may or may not be deserving are nonetheless loved in God's eyes. We are all made in the image of God and are God's beloved even though we are a complex combination of sinner and saint, fruitful and barren. And this means that we are always worthy of God's love and always in need of God's grace.

In the face of our failures, violence, and fear, God is always calling us to Him – always whispering within our hearts and calling us back into relationship with Him. I believe that this call is eternal and constant. I believe it comprises the deep thrum of energy underlying the cosmos. And I believe that if we listen really hard, we just might be able to catch this hymn of love that God is singing to us: “I love you... I love you... I love you.”

And the beautiful, amazing, and humbling truth of it all is that God truly believes that we are worthy of this eternal love and grace. If we can remember this, if we can train our ears to hear this love song and allow God’s love to continue the transformation of our hearts, perhaps then we can be better tenants and stewards of his kingdom.

Frederick Buechner wrote simply and beautifully about grace with this:

“The grace of God means something like: Here is your life. You might never have been, but you are because the party wouldn’t have complete without you. Here is the world. Beautiful and terrible things will happen. Don’t be afraid. I am with you. Nothing can ever separate us. It’s for you I created the universe. I love you.”

Amen.