10.4.26 Sermon on Matthew 21:33-46

Well, this is going to be a short sermon today since we have the drama team presentation today, so we won't dig in as deeply as we might otherwise. But I do think this is one of Jesus' more challenging parables to read and wrap our brains around. In this story, we have a landowner who has some tenants, and the tenants reject the landowner's authority. This property has been entrusted to them to take care of and to cultivate. But the tenants do not want to give the owner his due, and so they start beating and killing the servants who are sent to collect the fruit.

This parable is just riddled with violence – violence that continues to escalate. Each new messenger that is sent out to collect the fruit from the tenants is met with further violence. The tenants believe that violence will ultimately get them what they want, which is control, wealth, and power. Walter Wink, a religious and biblical studies scholar, describes this as the myth of redemptive violence – the belief that violence saves and that "might makes right." We see this all around us in the world today. We see this in the language used about war. We see it in interpersonal relationships – when we see articulated the desire to defeat, to vanquish our enemies once and for all.

Jesus exposes that myth of redemptive violence in this parable that we heard this morning. And while violence might overpower an opponent, it cannot ultimately heal the brokenness that produces that conflict in the first place. And so violence just perpetuates itself over, and over, and over again until somebody finally decides that they are no longer going to continue in that manner. This parable really asks us a question. Are we more concerned about winning, (whatever that might mean), or are we more concerned with bearing the fruit of God's kingdom?

The violence in this story becomes something of a trap. The landowner thinks, "If I send my son, then they will recognize who he is and they will cut him some slack. Surely they will not harm him!" Well, the tenants do recognize the son as the heir to this vineyard, but they kill him, believing that they can then claim the inheritance. The violence does not stop. It continues. The tenants believe that this violence will secure their future.

They are caught up in it and cannot see another reality. They imagine that eliminating this son will finally solve their problems with once and for all. And their greed and desire to control, their aspirations of power, lead them to continue to commit these acts of great violence.

The cycle perpetuates itself in the world around us. Retaliation just creates a new generation of enemies, rather than any kind of lasting peace. And we see that fear produces even more violence, and revenge demands further revenge. We can become so focused on

punishing others, or getting even ,or making sure that person “gets what they deserve” for what they have done to “me and mine,” that we lose sight completely of justice, of mercy, of the possibility of reconciliation. We lose sight of the possibility of healing that brokenness that is underneath all of it.

And so this parable is spoken as a warning to the religious leaders that Jesus is engaging. The religious leaders know that Jesus is speaking to them and about them. Jesus communicates to them that they are becoming the very people who reject God's messengers.

And as religious people here, ourselves, I think we have to ask ourselves today, “Where do we justify our own harmful actions because we believe our cause is right?” That’s exactly what the Pharisees and the other religious leaders were doing. They believed they were right. They were doing this only because they wanted to preserve the “right way” of doing things, of being faithful to God. I’ll repeat the question for us: where do we justify our own harmful actions because we believe that our cause is right?

But God flips the narrative, as usual. We hear that at the end of this parable, when Jesus says “The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone.” Jesus identifies himself with the rejected stone. The powers that reject Jesus believe that they can preserve their own power by removing him. But we know, ultimately, much like in the parable, as the heir, the son, is put to death, Jesus himself is put to death by Rome at the hands of the empire. Jesus is seen by Rome as one who is seen as insubordinate, as one who is undermining the whole power structure of Rome. And the world sees this cross, this execution, this humiliating crucifixion, as a sign of defeat.

The cross is what happens to insurrectionists. You get killed in a very public and humiliating way to so that everybody will understand that this is not what you do. The violence of it is used as coercion.

And the cross, while seen as a defeat, actually exposes the limits of worldly power. Because we know three days later, Jesus rises from the dead. Even this Roman tool of execution and humiliation cannot keep Jesus down. And he rises, but he doesn't rise because he inflicted violence back upon Rome. He rises and he has stopped the self-perpetuating cycle. We even hear on the cross those words indicating that that is the way that Jesus is working when he says, “Forgive them, they don't know what they're doing.” In Jesus’ story, death and violence do not have the last word.

And in God’s kingdom, brought through Jesus, violence is not the way. Jesus reveals this alternative to the myth of redemptive violence. The world says, “You have to defeat your enemy – and do it no matter how, and at all costs – defeat your enemy to secure ‘peace.’”

But Jesus reveals that God's kingdom is based on self-giving love. The world discards the rejected, but God makes Jesus Christ and his ways the cornerstone. The kingdom is recognized by its fruit through justice rather than domination, and mercy rather than revenge, and reconciliation over hatred, and faithfulness over greed.

This morning in the kids Sunday school, we were actually looking at the Old Testament reading that was in today's lectionary, which is from Exodus. It's the story of the giving of the ten Commandments. And we talked a little bit about what faith is supposed to do. We talked about the difference between faith shaping how we live versus this misconstrued idea that we somehow use our faith to tell other people what to do. Faith is not about telling others what to do. Faith is not about coercion or controlling others. It is, instead something that shapes us and invites us into a new way of being.

What are we basing our lives and our community of faith upon? Are we building on the world's promises of power? Or are we building upon Jesus and his way, with him as our cornerstone? What are we building upon?

The tenants, they believe that killing the son would secure their future. Their actions expose that lie, that violence can somehow save us. But Jesus reveals that God's kingdom, and God's kingdom is a place of peace and self-giving love. As Christians we are called to confront injustice without invoking hatred, or revenge, or domination. Those things cannot be our foundation. No. Jesus, the cornerstone, the one who teaches us self-giving love, he is our foundation.

The question I leave us with today, "Are we building our lives on the myth of redemptive violence or on Jesus who reveals that inverted, upside down self-giving love of God?" Amen.