

Malcolm Clemens Young
Grace Cathedral, San Francisco, CA X37, L27
18 Pentecost (Proper 22A) 8:30 & 11:00 a.m. Eucharist
Sunday 8 October 2017

Jeremiah 22:13-15
Psalm 148:7-14
Philippians 3:4b-14
Matthew 11:25-30

Vengeance and Forgiveness

"Forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on" (Phil 3).

Imagine it is July 1, 1751. You live in the farmlands below the Holyoke Mountain Range, near the great Connecticut River in Northampton. Eventually this will be called Western Massachusetts, but now it is not far from the frontier of European settlement. On this warm Sabbath day you sit on wooden pews in a Puritan church. The pastor, in his late forties, has served here for twenty-four years.

As a young man, he led this church when it became the birthplace of the Great Awakening. The books and pamphlets he wrote about this extraordinary revival of spirituality became international bestsellers and put this remote town on the map. You do not realize it but the Reverend Mister Jonathan Edwards will have the reputation as the New World's greatest theologian for the next three hundred years.

This fact would probably astonish you since your church has voted to fire him and this is his last sermon as your pastor. Northampton has been growing. Escalating land values and trade have led to greater inequalities than the town has yet faced. Edwards angered powerful people in this community because of his uncompromising opposition to the pressures of materialism. Furthermore, some young men in the town have found an anatomy book and are using it to taunt women about their private parts. Edwards has been outspoken in demanding discipline even for these children of prominent citizens.

His grandfather was the pastor before him and Edwards has reversed one of his most distinctive policies. Edwards now demands a testimony of faith before anyone can become a member of the church. This theological conviction is the stated reason for his removal.

Edwards has baptized their children, married them, buried their loved ones, and counseled them when there seemed like no hope. He now stands to say farewell. He says, "we live in a world of change, where nothing is certain or stable... a little time, a few revolutions of the sun, brings to pass... surprising alterations, in... persons, in families, in towns and in churches, in countries and in nations." He points out that despite all the change we see in this world, God will bring together pastors and their congregations on the Day of Judgment. Then, "every error and false opinion shall be detected; all deceit and delusion shall vanish away before the light of that day." Then

“all shall know the truth with the greatest certainty, and there shall be no mistakes to rectify.”¹

I think in almost all of us (even preachers of predestination) there is a longing for this kind of Judgment Day. That is when our divorced spouse finally gets what he deserves, when a parent has to face what she has done, when the boss who fired us or the friend who betrayed us receives the full force of God’s justice. “Then they’ll know how I feel,” we think to ourselves. This is the fantasy of being justified by someone who really understands. It is one of the most appealing aspects of believing in God’s omniscience.

Jesus tells the story of an investor, a landlord who builds a vineyard with a fence, winepress and watchtower. He plants vines but during the five years that it takes for them to begin producing wine, the tenants there begin to think they own this place. At harvest time, the owner sends his representatives. The tenants beat one, killed another and stoned another. They do this again. The owner then makes the fatal mistake of sending his own son as his legal representative. They kill him. Jesus asks the religious leaders who are persecuting him, “what will the owner do to those tenants?”

At first the point seems obvious. The Pharisees condemn themselves when they say that the owner, “will put those wretches to a miserable death and lease the vineyard to other tenants.” This story has been used to claim that God has taken the kingdom away from the Jews. Among Protestants this reading was probably used to suggest that God would take away his kingdom from the Roman Catholics. Maybe there are Mormons somewhere using this same parable to claim that God was taking the kingdom away from the Protestants.

Our reading from Isaiah shows where Jesus got the story. Isaiah criticizes leaders of his own society. He suggests that their work is not bearing productive fruit and that as a result God will permit the vineyard (as a symbol for the people of Israel) to be dismantled. Jesus personalizes and intensifies the story. His version is not merely about failure, but about greed, theft and murder.

In the vineyard owner, Jesus chooses an odd character to make as his example. Alexander the Great (356-323 B.C.) conquered almost the whole known ancient world three hundred years before Jesus’ time. His conquest brought Greek culture and language to the Holy Land. The Greek-speaking kings who governed after his death would expropriate land and either grant it to their strongest supporters or sell it to wealthy foreigners. Jewish people deeply resented these absentee landlords and foreign overseers who would often claim between 40 and 50 percent of the produce.²

This introduces new complexity into Isaiah’s simple story. Who are you meant to be? Are you a greedy tenant, or someone unfairly oppressed by a distant tyrant, hoping to finally own the full fruits of your own labor? Are you the distant owner initially feeling

frustration because of your dependence on nameless serfs and then through your own tragic miscalculation, bearing some responsibility for endangering your son? Can you feel some of the rage that follows this realization? Or are you the son, proud of your position and responsibility, an elite who suddenly and tragically discovers his own vulnerability?

1. Let me make two points this morning. First, this story reminds me that ultimately evil does not prevail. In Junior High School I had a friend named Phil. One day Phil's older brother Steve and his girlfriend were forced into a van at gunpoint in the supermarket around the corner from my house. They drove down to Putah Creek where both teenagers were killed. Years later, DNA evidence linked these deaths to a man who committed a string of murders across the west. Two sweet and perfect teenagers died a terrible death because this man enjoyed the sense of power that killing made him feel. This week the events in Las Vegas brought that terrible experience back to me.

The philosopher Immanuel Kant wrote about what he called "Radical Evil."³ Human beings harm others out of our own self-interest, but we are also capable of completely inexplicable cruelty. Jesus' story reminds me that there is nowhere for evil to hide from God. Even when everything seems to be spinning out of control, evil does not have the last word.

2. My second point is more subtle and difficult. Jesus' parable is not just about evil people out there. It is about what happens in me too. God cares about what we do. In fact, that might even be the primary meaning of this story.

Two hundred years ago, the German theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834) wrote that many of our opinions about Christ's Last Judgment arise out of, "a vengeful desire to enhance the misery of unbelievers, and to exclude them from... the good."⁴ For him, the Last Judgment at its best symbolizes the hope that one day all beings will be freed from evil actions to such a great extent that evil will in effect cease to exist.⁵

Until then we all face an inner struggle. The amazing thing about this story is that Jesus does not really supply an ending. He gives the Pharisees a set of circumstances and they are the ones who say that the vineyard owner will put the tenants "to a miserable death." But this is not what Jesus himself says, or more profoundly, this is not how God acts when it comes to Jesus.

When God sends the Son into the vineyard where he is killed, this story is not about how his persecutors are humiliated and put to justice. The story of Jesus is about how life overcomes fear and death. It is about the power of forgiveness, how God brings about healing and wholeness in miraculous ways. In his Letter to the Philippians the Apostle Paul describes the zeal with which he persecuted the followers of Jesus. He

even participated in the murder of St. Stephen. God didn't put him to death but showed him a whole new way of being.

God moved Paul's heart so deeply that he came to "regard everything as loss" compared to, "the surpassing value of knowing Jesus" (Phil. 3). He lived for this love, because in his words, "Christ Jesus has made me his own" (Phil. 3). Under God's care and in the face of this forgiveness he became one of the most faithful of all Jesus' disciples in history.

In conclusion, Jesus does not tell the parable of the vineyard tenants to give Jews, Christians, Protestants or even Mormons a sense of ancestral entitlement or the right to condemn whole classes of people. Jesus tells us this story both to remind us that God is in charge (that vengeance belongs to the Lord) and that God's ways of forgiveness and love surpass human understanding. We have the chance to change right now. In our hearts we carry, we are, the tenants and the landlord and the son.

You may have heard an old story that the Chippewa Indians used to tell about a young boy and his grandfather. The old man tells him about the fierce battle within every person between two wolves. One wolf is evil. He is greed, lies, jealousy, anger, condemnation, prejudice, distrust and fear. He feels superior, insecure and self-pitying at the same time.

The other wolf is good. He is strong, gentle, kind, self-sacrificing and true. He has faith. He is at peace and he shares everything with a generous and joyful heart. The young boy asks his grandfather, "which wolf wins?" The grandfather replies "the one you feed."

¹ Edwards' "Farewell Sermon" is printed in many different volumes. The story I tell here is influenced by Philip F. Gura, *Jonathan Edwards: America's Evangelical* (NY: Hill and Wang, 2005), 162-4.

² Herman, C. Waetjen, "Intimations of the Year of Jubilee in the Parables of the Wicked Tenants and the Workers in the Vineyard," *Journal of Religion and Theology in Namibia*, 1, 1999.

³ Immanuel Kant, *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*.

⁴ Frierich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, Tr. H.R. Macintosh and J.S. Steward (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1928), 715-7.

⁵ Being part of a twenty-first century democracy makes us partly responsible for a lot of terrible things. The Arctic ice cap continues to shrink. Scientists agree that this is mostly because of emissions from our smokestacks and tailpipes. Although the science of global climate change proves that we need to act immediately, ordinary self-interested people refuse to change.

The twentieth century theologian Paul Tillich points out that the Greek word for truth *aleithia* means literally to unveil something. For ancient Greeks truth is discovered, the opposite of truth is opinion. For Christians, the opposite of truth is a lie. Truth is not something that is known, but something that we do in relation to others. Tillich writes, "You cannot have an opinion about the Christ after you have faced him. You can only do the truth by following Him, or lie by denying him."⁵ For Jesus himself truth is a form of action. He says, "Anyone who hears my words and acts on them is like the wise man who builds his house on a rock" (Mt. 7:24).