

Proper 22  
Matthew 21:33-46

## Beloved

By the Rev. Salying Wong

Jesus asks the religious leaders, “So, what do you think?” If I’d been their adviser, I would have said, “Don’t answer that.” I’d whisper in their ears, “Remember the last one? It didn’t end well.”

We’re in the part of the lectionary that drops us in the middle of Holy Week. In this part of Matthew, Jesus has given his third prediction of his death and has initiated the drama of the passion with his triumphal entry in Jerusalem. Last week, He turned up the heat by teaching at the Temple. When the religious authorities of the Temple came to challenge him, he told them the parable of two sons. One promised that he would work in his father’s vineyard, but didn’t; the second son said he wouldn’t but changed his mind and did. Jesus asked, “Which did the will of the father?” And the religious leaders answered, “The second.” Then he said, “Those who are considered the worst of the worst in society--the tax collectors and prostitutes--are going ahead of you in the Kingdom of God.” He let them draw their own conclusion: they were the second son. Disobedient!

You would think they would have learned, but their desire to preserve their image and power by winning against Jesus makes them stay for another challenge. Jesus tells them another parable. Jesus says, “There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a wine press in it, and built a watchtower. Then he leased it to tenants and went to another country. When the harvest time had come, he sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his produce. But the tenants seized his slaves and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. Again he sent other slaves, more than the first; and they treated them in the same way. Finally he sent his son to them, saying, ‘They will respect my son.’ But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, ‘This is the heir; come,

let us kill him and get his inheritance.” So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him. Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?”

The religious leaders answer, “He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the harvest time.”

The scenario in the parable is awful, full of violence and death. The religious leaders are repulsed by the wicked tenants. Their moral judgment is that the wicked tenants deserve to die miserable deaths for their violence and murder. In so saying, they reveal that their hearts are as violent as the wicked tenants in the parable. In fact, *they are the wicked tenants!*

And that’s why you don’t answer when Jesus asks you what you think.

You might have noticed today how similar Jesus’ description of the parable is to the image in Isaiah 5, our first reading. That is no accident. Jesus intends to use the vineyard image in the same way as Isaiah, as God’s beloved Israel. The same failure is experienced in Isaiah’s day as is experienced in Jesus’ day. Those whom God had set to produce good fruit in Israel had produced wild grapes. As Isaiah said, “God expected justice, but instead there was bloodshed. God expected righteousness, but instead there was a cry of agony in the vineyard.”

Jesus means that God had sent his prophets again and again to the vineyard to get the leaders to change their ways. But they’ve never changed. And now, God sends his son, hoping they will listen to him. But, they aren’t; they won’t. Instead, they will murder him.

But even murder and violence will not thwart the work of the son. He, who is rejected like a stone, will actually become the cornerstone in what God is building. That is why the son’s coming is different from the prophets. We know what happens. The son will still make forgiveness possible while he hangs on the cross; he will still make forgiveness possible when he is

raised on the third day. And when he is ascended, his forgiveness extends to all people, in all time and in all places.

So, how could the religious leaders have reacted instead? What could they have thought or said besides, "The owner will put those wretches to a miserable death." They could have been appalled by their own violent hearts and repented.

Have you ever been appalled by yourself? I was recently appalled by myself. As you may have heard, a certain politician and his wife have contracted COVID. Among my first thoughts were "wretch". I reacted like the Sadducees, appalled by the behavior of the other, but not noticing my own. It took me an hour or so before I was sufficiently appalled by myself. I asked myself, "Who am I? Who do I know that I am?" I remembered, "I am the beloved." So, I prayed for forgiveness and for those who troubled me.

St. Francis knew what it was like to struggle for his identity in the midst of violence done to him. When his father found out that he sold his cloth to rebuild a church, he flogged him mercilessly. Today, if people saw the brutality of the beating, they would call the authorities--it was so violent. Even after Francis had built his order, he was still afraid of his brutal father. One time, when he needed to go into town, he knew he might run into his father. So, he asked a beggar to walk with him. The beggar's job, if Francis were to see his father was to say, "You are the beloved."

The time before I'm appalled by myself is usually a time of denial and a struggle with old wounds. I can weave every compelling reason for why I'm justified to think and feel the way I do. But, my reasons never justify the violence in my heart. That is what Jesus is trying to get the religious leaders of his day to see. Whatever reasons the religious leaders of his day had--and I'm sure they were very compelling and very religious and righteous--they were only repeating the violence that they think they were above. Jesus' message applies not only to the religious leaders of his day, but to everyone who wishes to follow him into the Kingdom.

It is a gift from God when we can be appalled by ourselves. The theological term for this is confession. The good news is that Jesus is always ready to forgive and liberate us from the violence that enslaves our hearts and minds. We can hear Jesus whispering in our ears, "You are the beloved. You do not have to repeat what you wish not to be. Turn, repent, and be forgiven. Beloved."