Proper 22 Year A 2026

I loved seminary. I would have stayed there the rest of my life if they hadn't made me graduate and get a job. It was like being in college except that I cared. One of the things, among many, that I loved about it was that our biblical studies were team taught. There were three professors of scripture… one was an expert on Hebrew scripture, and the two others were experts on the New Testament. All three of them would attend all of our classes on scripture; one would lecture, and the others would join in the discussions. Fascinating discussions. Their approach enabled us to see clearly the connections between the New and Old Testaments; that New Testament literature, and its Messianic vision were deeply rooted in the Judaic tradition. Y'all hear me talk about typology a lot…. Using typology, the New Testament writers were able to observe history repeating itself; able to recognize patterns within history, and therefore recognize the patterns of God's behavior, as it were, within history. Jesus heals a young child at the same location where Elijah healed a child; John the Baptist declared salvation at hand, quoting Isaiah proclaiming the salvation, the repatriation of Israel back into their homeland some four centuries earlier. Because these patterns repeat themselves, we learn about matters of recurrent truth in the grand scheme of things…. What the world

is like; what God is like; what we are like in the course of history's becoming. When things behave according to type, then we must pay attention.

My job as an ordained theologian is to make relevant meaning of these ancient texts, recognizing that some things never change, that indeed there are patterns in history, as it is being made, to which we must pay attention. Karl Barth, the great German theologian of the twentieth century, famously said that the preacher's job is to preach with the bible in one hand and the New York Times in the other. How does scripture speak to us in our own day and age? What is God up to? I believe that we can still know the truth, or touch the mystery of it, as it has evolved and is evolving, using our ancient texts that we call the bible. That is true of literature, of poetry, of music, of painting and sculpture… But the Bible is our particular repository of the truth, and part of our discipline as Christian church people, is to dig deep into scripture with an imaginative and critical eye, and see what God may be saying to us in the context of post-modernity, our own day and age.

When it comes to the teachings of Jesus, the device used most often, is the parable. That's true in all four Gospels. So here's the thing about parables: There usually isn't one single meaning; parables are slippery; sometimes one parable

may even seem contradictory; parables are often intended to surprise the listener; one has to expect the unexpected. I was taught that the way to interpret a parable was to look hard at the context, that being the world behind the text, that is, what the world was like within which the passage was written… like Roman occupation; like, in the case of Mark, Matthew, and Luke, just after the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple by the Romans…. And then one looks at the writer's agenda as best we can tell; noting overarching themes in a particular Gospel. The prologues tells us a lot about what the agenda will be… and then we have to relate what we have gleaned to our own world, our context…. Because ultimately that is what matters. If scripture isn't relevant as to how we live, then we are all just wasting our time with scripture. But, of course I believe it does relate; and I believe God is still revealing Godself, even amid these arcane, sometimes cryptic ancient words.

So all of that brings us to the Gospel reading for today… a parable. It's called the 'parable of the wicked tenants' in my Jerusalem Bible. So, for this morning we're going to follow the aforementioned interpretive process, and see if there may be a word, a learning in it for us; perhaps a clue as to what God may be up to. First the world of the text: Rome has conquered and occupied Palestine including Judea. Because of an attempt at an insurrection in Jerusalem in 70 C.E.,

Roman legions razed the Temple, and burned much of the city… The wealth of the region was held by an elite few; taxes were unbearably high; the vast majority of the people lived in poverty; many close to starvation. The Jewish leadership, that is to say the elite… the priestly class of the temple, the scribes, and the Pharisees have special privileges in the realm because they are charged with keeping the population in line. They enjoy many of the privileges as their Roman elite counterparts.

The economy was mostly agrarian. It was the habit of the Romans to confiscate all lands in their occupied territories. The Romans gave charge over these confiscated lands to their political allies, other nobles, and would-be vassals of the empire. Most landowners didn't even live in the region. They simply hired a local caretaker to oversee their property, conscript the profits and send payment abroad… such an economy sapped the resources of the region… One can only imagine the resentment toward the so-called Pax Romana. That is the context within which this parable was written. The world behind the text.

And what of Matthew's agenda? Matthew is the only Gospel writer to give the account of Herod the Great slaughtering the young male children of Israel. Only Matthew juxtaposes the decapitation of John the Baptizer with the account

of Jesus feeding the five thousand. Matthew from the outset of his Gospel is vilifying the empire; and then Matthew is also relentless in his critique of the Jewish leadership; their complicity to the system; their living in opulence while the Jewish population lives in squalor. Matthew also talks a lot about bearing fruit. He's speaking of faith as practice. It's one thing to believe, but quite another to put one's faith into practice. The fruits, to which Matthew often alludes are compassion, and mercy, and doing justice; welcoming the stranger, serving the poor and the outcasts, visiting people in prison, healing the sick. This is religion for Matthew; not a dogmatic belief system, but a practice… a practice in the face of unimaginable injustice and institutional cruelty.

So now we're ready to see what this parable may be saying to us. There was a landowner (think absentee landlord), and he leased his farm, a vineyard to local tenants… they worked the land, tended the vines on the landlord's behalf. The landlord sends slaves to collect the produce, and the tenants kill the slaves. Then the landowner sends his son, and the tenants kill him as well, thinking they can take over the vineyard. So the landlord is the last man standing… and Jesus poses the question as to what this landlord will do to these tenants; and of course the answer is that he will "bring those wretches to a wretched end."

I've heard sermons on this parable many times; and I've preached on it a few times as well; and I've read commentaries on this parable…and I've only heard it interpreted one way: The Landowner is God; the vineyard is Israel; the tenants are the Jewish leadership entrusted to the care of the homeland; the Son is Jesus whom the tenants kill… so God's going to come and wreak havoc, punish, and set things right…. I think that's just too easy… that's not the God of mercy and compassion; that's not the God who forgives seventy times seven; that's not the God whose Son welcomes tax collectors and prostitutes…. Here's the hook: Just after the scribes and Pharisees answer Jesus' question about what the landowner will do to these wicked tenants… and they say he will bring those wretches to a wretched end (you see, Jesus has the scribes and Pharisees uttering this hateful language)… then Jesus says, " Did you never…. Did you never read in the bible where it says, the stone the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone… this is God's doing, and it is a marvel…. He goes on: I tell you, the kingdom will be taken from you and given to those who bear fruit." Vengeance is not a practice for followers of Jesus.

I don't think this is an allegory at all. I think this is Jesus denouncing the system…. A system so inured to the privileged and the elite at the expense of the 99 percent, that it is unsustainable. Jesus has no love for the order of things… The

landlord cares nothing for his tenants. He's out of the country. He just wants his profit. The tenants are sick and tired of the system, so much so, they revolt. It is a system that is coercive, unfair, demeaning, and violent. We've seen this scenario before in Matthew… And the point is for Matthew that the Jewish leadership are a part of this deathly system; they've sold out to it.

Jesus says there's another way… a way rejected by powers and principalities…. Like a rejected stone during the construction of a building… It is the way of justice and truth and equality and forbearance, and forgiveness…. It is a way wherein the care of each other is our very first priority… this empathetic and compassionate way of life is the foundation upon which a sustainable and just society can flourish. Greed and power and wealth and self-interest will ultimately lead to violence… It always has, and it always will.

We brothers and sisters are to be that cornerstone of a new way, a new society, a new world. That's why we're here on this earth. We live in a time, and in a place, when we have been given an almost unbearable clarity as to what greed and power can do. We must take back God's world for God's sake, but not just for God's sake, but for the untold many who suffer under the evil that besets us. It is possible I think… that we in this country are poised to recreate a society

whose foundation is justice. Perfect? No… but just… yes. The signs are there. The signs are here and now. History tells us that empires of power rise and fall to make way for the new. We live in a post-modern empire; and we see history repeating itself. There are things in our world that have to die, but scripture tells us that death is a mere gateway to new life…. And it tells us that Love will never be vanquished. Those are some things we can trust. But for the time being…We, brother and sisters… we just have to keep producing the fruit.