

Pentecost 18 ,Proper 22. October 8, 2017. St. Augustine's in-the-Woods, Freeland WA
Nigel Taber-Hamilton. Isaiah 5:1-7; Psalm 80:7-14; Philippians 3:4b-14; Matthew 21:33-46

There's a phrase doing the rounds right now that isn't new, but has found new life in our current political environment: "If you're not outraged, you're not paying attention!" Well, there's a phrase that's similar that applies to every parable that Jesus told: "If you're not shocked, you're not paying attention!"

One biblical scholar has described parables – properly understood – as “narrative time bombs” (Eugene Peterson). For Jesus' listeners they were stealthy stories that were designed to steal into your heart and your imagination, designed to confuse you – at least initially – which will, for a while, throw you off balance.

The adjective I used to describe these stories is important: “stealthy.” Any good story-teller knows that you have to draw your listener in, get them to relax. And then, at some later point those nice, interesting, vivid, well-told stories bring you up short, and you say “wait a minute....!” The “Ah-ha!” moment comes as the real meaning explodes in your mind when you least expect it, and it's “Pow! Right in the kisser!” And – hopefully! – you've been blown to a new place, a new understanding, a new awareness.

To us – 2,000 years removed – Jesus' parables easily do the first part: the heart and imagination stealing. But the second – the off-balancing confusion that will cause us to struggle to understand fully? The part that breaks us open to the profound possibilities? Not so much!

What today we often hear as a result of our distance and failure to appreciate context is stories that seem like cozy, tame little tales about farmers and seeds, women and bread baking, fathers and sons, and stories about generous individuals who help people in need.

A major clue that we're missing the point Jesus is trying to make is that we're puzzled by the response to some of his listeners. For instance, in today's gospel passage, the response of the religious authorities to a for-them “long-ago” tale about viticulture, and tenant-landlord relations is fury! Why? Because they realized that Jesus was talking about them!

So this parable was not so much like a “time-bomb” that would go off only later but more like a proximity-fuse grenade, that went off as soon as Jesus' politically connected hearers got close to it, when it took next-to-no-time to figure out. The obvious question, I think, is this: Why did this parable so outrage them?

On face value, the parable says that evil vineyard workers coveted the vineyard's harvest for themselves, then simply coveted the vineyard itself. As a consequence, they were not only willing to be violent, they actually followed through with that violence toward the son and his co-workers when the opportunity came. We all would see that behavior as evil. And, no doubt, so would the religious authorities listening to Jesus. Wouldn't all people of good faith see how wrong these tenants' behavior was? ...except....!

Except for today's Old Testament reading from Isaiah! This is a passage that Jesus was intentionally referencing by talking about a vineyard in his parable. Isaiah said that "the vineyard of the lord of Hosts **is** the house of Israel." All of a sudden, the vineyard in Jesus' parable wasn't just any vineyard! It's Israel. And the religious authorities were.....the leaders of Israel. **The "lightbulb" moment for them was when they made that connection**, that Jesus was saying to them "you are the evil, violent tenants who will stop at nothing to seize what is not yours to take!" **Little wonder they were furious!**

Here in today's gospel is someone – Jesus – challenging the Status Quo, someone trying to "speak truth to power," someone saying "the emperor has no clothes." This is not the only time he does this; in fact his whole life is that sort of a challenge. Institutions, especially hierarchical ones, don't like people who do that!

I think we need to be cautious here! It would be easy to see ourselves as siding with Jesus and claiming to be on the moral high ground. Human nature does that! We like to convince ourselves we're always going to be in the right side of history! I know about myself when it comes to institutions – and especially the Church – that there are times when the things I say are directed at the Church as a hierarchical institution that the Church doesn't like to hear. At the same time, I can be discomfited when someone challenges me in my role as part of that same hierarchical institution! It's a reminder to me of the dangers of thinking I'm right!

For me, there are two other takeaways to all this: **Firstly**, this Jesus' challenge is not something exclusively anchored in and bound to the reality of 1st Century Israel; it's a very contemporary issue. How do we as individuals relate to the institutions that make up our culture, our society? What do we do when those institutions are unresponsive to our concerns, when they ignore the issues we think are important? And, for us as Christians and as moral beings, what do we say and do when these institutions seem to be violating our sense of fairness, violating our ethical values, hurting people we care about? **Whether you are an establishment supporter or establishment challenger these questions are the same – and isn't that interesting common ground?!!** And that common ground was evident in the events in Las Vegas last Sunday. I don't mean that they have produced significant debate about the role of angry white men with guns in our culture, or about the 2nd Amendment. I mean that one of the most striking things that played out during those achingly long minutes of hell when gunfire was raining down on innocent concert goers was this: that from the very moment the first shot was fired, not a single person – whether a festival attender, nor a first responder, whether an unarmed civilian or an armed police officer – no one ever asked any of the injured or wounded or those trying to escape: "are you a Muslim or a Christian? Are you a Republican or a Democrat?" "Are you in favor of or opposed to the 2nd Amendment?" The common ground of a shared humanity relegates the questions of who's 'in' and who's 'out,' who has power and who doesn't to the category of "not as important as being human." That, surely, is the basis for a common exploration of what it means to be an American in 2017.

The second takeaway from this parable is, I think, this: That it's a little unfair to say to most contemporary Christians, of Jesus' parables, that ***if you're not shocked, you're not paying attention!*** At least, it's a little unfair if you don't know how parables work! However (!), now

you do! There are consequences to knowing this, for you and for me, not the least of which is the intentional work required to get to that place of realizing that Jesus' parables aren't simply cozy stories designed to make us feel good, or others feel uncomfortable!