

A Storytelling Commentary on Matthew 21:33-46

Thomas E. Boomershtine, PhD

"Listen to another parable.

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. 37

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?"
They said to him, "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."

Jesus said to them, "Have you never read in the scriptures:
'The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone;
this was the Lord's doing, and it is amazing in our eyes'?"
Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you
and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom.
The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces;
and it will crush anyone on whom it falls."

When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables,
they realized that he was speaking about them.
They wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowds,
because they regarded him as a prophet.

There are no verbal threads to hang on to, so the primary structure of memory in relation to this parable is the episodes. The first one is about the vineyard and the construction of the vineyard and the coming of the harvest time. The second episode is the sending of the slaves. The third episode is the sending of the son. The fourth episode is the response of the tenants and the killing of the son. The fifth episode is about the stone and the prophecy of the loss of the Kingdom. The final episode is then the response of the chief priests and the Pharisees. If you remember this structure, it will be easier to remember. That's my only suggestion about what will make this parable easier to internalize.

In Matthew's story of Jesus' ministry in the Temple, this is the second parable Jesus tells in response to the chief priests and the scribes asking him about his authority to carry out his prophetic cleansing of the Temple (Mt. 21.12-17). The first is the parable of the two sons who do the opposite of what they said. The question about his authority was a public attack on his credibility. Their question—"who gave you the authority to do these things?"—was probably told with a tone of condescending skepticism.

In this parable, therefore, Jesus is responding to their critique. This parable has the same dynamic structure as Nathan's parable to David. After the story of David's affair with Bathsheba and the death of Uriah (II Sam. 11), Nathan went to David and told him a parable. A poor man had an only lamb that he had brought up as a child in his family. A rich man had many flocks but when a traveler came, and the rich man killed the poor man's lamb and served it to his guest. David responded with rage and said that the man should be killed. Nathan responds: "You are the man." So David condemns himself. Likewise in this parable, Jesus tells the story of the tenants who killed the owner's son. And Jesus asks them, "When he comes, what will the owner of the vineyard do to those tenants?" They, that is the chief priests and the scribes said to him, "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." Jesus' response is not as direct as Nathan's. He quotes Psalm 118.22-23 about the stone rejected by the builders, prophecies that the vineyard will be given to a people who will produce the fruits of the kingdom and ends (probably) with the parable of the crushing stone. The chief priests and the elders then recognize that he is telling the parable about them. But rather than repenting as David did, they want to arrest him but do not because of the people's support.

This parable has often been understood as a supersessionist story that teaches the replacement of Jews by Gentiles as the tenants of the Kingdom of God. The conclusion is often that Matthew uses this parable as a framework for an anti-Jewish reinforcement of the superiority of the early Christian community. In view of the probability that Matthew's Gospel is addressed to Jews in the aftermath of the Jewish War, this interpretation is probably wrong.

Telling the parable: Jesus like Nathan is telling this in a manner that will appeal to his listeners to be extremely critical of the "rich man" in Nathan's case and the wicked tenants in Jesus' case. Like Nathan with David, Matthew is leading his Jewish audience to make a judgment that will then apply to them. This means that the parable should be told in a polemical manner that expresses outrage at the actions of the tenants in a crescendo of rage.

Thus just as Nathan pronounces in response to David's condemnation of the man, "You're the man" so also Jesus pronounces to the chief priests and scribes after their condemnation of the tenants "Have you never read the scriptures" and applies their condemnation of the tenants to themselves. In the context of Jesus' ministry in 33 CE or so, this parable is a prophecy of his death at the hands of the chief priests and scribes and

the loss of the kingdom. The implication is that Jesus recognizes, as he had earlier predicted to the twelve (the third passion prophecy is 20.17-19), that he will be rejected and killed and that the chief priests and scribes will be involved in doing that. This is an effort to get them to reflect about that action. But, just as Nathan says the child will die, so also here, the consequences of what will happen are named by Jesus: the kingdom of God will be taken away from them.

Now what did this parable mean to Matthew's audiences? In my opinion, Matthew's Gospel was addressed to Jewish audiences; it was almost certainly composed in the late '70's or early 80's. Matthew's listeners heard this parable in the context of Jesus' death and resurrection and the aftermath of the Roman-Jewish war (66-70 CE) in which the Temple was destroyed and the entire priestly class essentially disappeared from history. The authority and power of the chief priests was lost. A factor in that history was their rejection of Jesus and the nation's choice, with the support of the majority of the chief priests, to follow the Zealots.

For Matthew's audiences, therefore, this parable is a confirmation of Jesus' prophecies and an appeal to reflect on the nation's choice and on their own personal decision about Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of God. This parable is in Matthew's context an invitation to his predominately Jewish audiences to reflect on the consequences of what the nation has done and to decide whether or not follow Jesus as the cornerstone of a new structure.

When heard in the context of the Christian church in the United States, the parable raises a similar question. In our ongoing decision as a nation to follow the way of war against our enemies rather than Jesus' way of doing good for our enemies and seeking reconciliation, we are also rejecting Jesus as our leader. We have reduced Matthew's message to individual conversion and salvation and have rejected the Gospel's proclamation of Jesus as the Messiah who pursued a consistent policy of non-violence. This parable is then told also to us as ones who are implicated in the killing of the Son of God sent by our rejection of the way that he modeled for us.