

First Presbyterian Church
Close Encounters of the Jesus Kind: Chief Priests
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1 Samuel 8:1-22; Luke 20:1-19

The sermon writing process always has its hurdles and walls that a preacher must get through to reach the final message. For me there is one particular wall that comes up every single time I preach. Spray painted in huge graffiti letters across the face of this wall are the words, “The Bible Says...”

I do not like this phrase. I have giant red flags that shoot up and alarms that go off when I hear “The Bible Says...” Here is the way. If you have spent any amount of time interacting with scripture that spans a significant time period of your life you know that “what the Bible says” changes. I don’t mean the words on the page, though scanning different translations you will find the words change from one to the other, I am talking about the meaning that fills us as we read.

You can read the same chapter as a child, a teen, a divorcee, a grandparent, and just before you die, and each reading of the chapter will say something different to you as you experience different corners of life.

This is why the wall of “The Bible Says...” causes me so much anxiety when I preach. I never want anyone to hear one of my sermons and think they KNOW what that scripture passage says and never again challenge their understanding. I don’t want someone to have a brilliant insight later on and feel like they are wrong because that isn’t how Pastor Bethany explained it.

But when I preach, I do want to offer you AN interpretation; something that could help your spiritual health and your relationship with God. To offer you that, I have to pick a direction to go and risk that someone might think what I say is the only thing the Bible is saying.

I bring this up this week because this parable is extremely debated among biblical scholars. It is still unclear to us what Jesus was trying to say. It is so frustrating and yet...one of the greatest gifts Jesus gave us. This parable shows the genius of Jesus’ teaching style, and I don’t want to ruin your interaction with this parable by telling you what it means. This week I decided not to decide. I’m going to make you do some of the work with the Spirit to get to a meaning that is valuable for your moment in this faith journey.

The Parable of the Wicked Tenants. First off, we are being primed to put the tenants into the villain category with the title of this section. Fun Bible fact: those titles were not in the original writings so we have to be careful not to let something a translator added relatively recently color the way we read these verses. They might be wicked, or there might be a plot twist we will miss if we start with that assumption.

First thing to do with any parable is identify what might be used in the metaphor. Characters can be stand-ins for other people, or groups of people, or God. Places can be significant and give hints to the meaning. Animals or inanimate objects that are key to the parable could represent something else like a coin or yeast. Parables are not metaphors, so not everything in the parable will be there to represent something else, but it is good to identify what could be used.

In this one we have a landowner, tenants, servants, and the landowner’s son as characters. The setting is a vineyard, but we also have a second implied setting of the landowner being “somewhere else” which

could be significant. And that's about it. There is the implied produce that has been harvested but we don't know what it is and it never exchanges hands, so kind of a non-player in the action of the parable.

Since the people are central to the story, most likely they are where we need to focus our attention. Whom do these people represent?

Currently, in the last 1,000 years or so, the popular interpretation of this parable goes like this. God is the landowner who has entrusted the vineyard to Israel. God sent prophets to gather the fruits of the vineyard but the prophets were beaten up and insulted by Israel and God did not get the harvest God desired. So then God sent the son, Jesus, to meet with the tenants and get the fruit but they killed him. God's response will then be to destroy Israel and give the vineyard to new tenants.

Did you catch the antisemitic undertones in that interpretation? Hitler did. That way of understanding this parable was very much a part of why Hitler thought it was right to kill every Jewish person in the world. They had their chance with the vineyard and Hitler was the arm of the landowner coming to reclaim the vineyard.

I know there are many more people who grew up with this interpretation of this parable who did not come to that particular conclusion but it is an extreme example of why we need to be skeptical of the phrase, "The Bible Says..." Trying to capture scriptural meaning into an airtight box will rot any interpretation in the wrong environment.

Scripture needs to breathe to remain valuable and fresh. God as the landowner could be what Jesus meant. This could be a parable of warning that those of us who are currently tenants need to produce the fruit our landowner requires or else we will be destroyed and the land will be given to someone else. But let me show you how one adjustment changes the parable completely.

Critics of that interpretation say it misses a crucial element of the act of interpretation: it ignores the context. It is not our worldview that this parable is being told from, it is Jesus'. Jesus' life exists in the matrix of Roman occupation. Rome was the greatest economic and military superpower the world had known, and in the first century Judea/Palestine became part of the empire roughly sixty years before Jesus's birth. All he had ever known was centurions in the streets, and hillsides riddled with crosses, as a public warning of what happens when you cross the empire.

The Romanization of Palestine introduced the practice of tenant farmers. It was commonplace to have a wealthy, absent landowner, and tenant farmers. Tenant, meaning that they owned no land of their own. Why? Because the process of Romanization, and the taxes that came with it, caused them to amass debt, and eventually lose their land.

It is just as plausible that Jesus meant the Roman empire to be in the role of the absent landowner. I am going to give you a second to sit with that change. God is not the landowner; Rome is the landowner. Israel is still in the role of tenant farmer. We have only changed who the landowner is.

So, in Jesus's day, there was a lot of discussion about when and how God would act to liberate the people from their oppressive overlords. When will the land be ours again? There were multiple opinions about how this liberation would occur.

One approach, seen in the life of Jesus, was that of nonviolent resistance. This isn't pacifism, but a form of resistance that asserts one's dignity, while refusing to descend to the level of returning violence for violence.

Another option present in Jesus' day was that of violent resistance. How will we rid ourselves of the oppressors? We'll kill them. This is the option that won out in the Jewish Revolt of 66-73 CE. Rome responded to the uprising, retaliating by devastating the Temple and the city of Jerusalem. This would be recent history to the gospel writers and a motivating factor to why they want more people to know about the option Jesus taught.

An option that is nonviolent, that does not kill the tax collectors and soldiers, or anyone else Rome sends to keep them in line. That kind of violence will only lead to the landowner, Rome, showing up and killing Israel and giving the land to someone else.

Putting Rome as the landowner turns this parable into a warning that violence against oppressors will lead to more violence. They must choose a different way to resist.

I'll give you one more quick interpretation option that turns this parable from a parable of warning to a parable of hope.

Some Biblical scholars put God in the role of the landowner and Rome in the role of the tenants. Then this becomes a story of leadership that was once ordained by God but who have turned away from their duties. The landowner, God, eventually will come to destroy the wicked tenants and give the land to other leaders. Hope for those oppressed that God will destroy Rome and give the land to them.

There are lots of other adjustments we can try and maybe the options I gave you have already made your head start to spin. This is why reading the Bible seriously can be such a challenge. How do we know which is true?

We read, we discuss, we question, we experience, we gather, we debate, we research, we wonder, we live, and with the power of the Holy Spirit in you, in me, in us collectively, we find truths.

It is true that if we do not produce the fruits God desires, that duty will be taken away from us and given to another. It is true that impulsive violence against oppressors will lead to our own ruin. It is true that God will have the final say in who tends to the land in the Kingdom.

All of these are true and how incredible this book is that it grows with us AND is ready to meet us exactly as we are in every moment of life. If we do not bring our understanding to Jesus, he will not be able to guide us further. The religious leaders were not willing to claim an interpretation of John's baptisms and they tell Jesus, "We do not know where it was from." And so Jesus has nothing to work with and can only answer, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things."

We must be willing to do the work to seek difficult understandings and stay open to the guidance of the Spirit towards another interpretation. Together, in community, in all our different comprehensions, we hold THE truth, and yet none of us hold it absolutely.

So let us sit with the sermon the Spirit has preached to each of our own hearts.

Praise be to God.