

PRESSING ONWARD
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Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

Based on Matthew 21: 33-41. The Spiral of Violence in Parable Form

Today is World Communion Sunday, celebrated by Presbyterians and Lutherans and Methodists and everyone in between on the first Sunday in October every year since 1936, reminding us on this particular Sunday what we say every time we celebrate communion: that the risen Christ bids us come from east and west, north and south, across every border of human design to feast with him in eternal grace.

It is also Peacemaking Sunday. As we gather across time and space to feast on the peace that passes understanding, we join with other Presbyterians in offering a tangible response to the Presbyterian Peacemaking Program. We say with our gifts of dollars and cents that we want this gift of grace we receive at the table, this gift of peace we receive at the table, to be made real in the world beyond this table. Because we know we live in a world that is far from the promise of the peace we experience at this table.

I have been thinking much about this table and its gifts, as I have studied the Scripture that is before us this Sunday, struggling once again to make sense of such a violent parable from Matthew's gospel on such a Sunday devoted to peace.

If we are going to put this parable in the context of the table to which we come, we should note that it takes place during Holy Week. In those high stakes days between Palm Sunday and Easter when tensions are high and Jesus is just beginning to draw the kind of attention that will soon have him arrested and crucified on trumped up charges.

In the context of the violence of that horrible—yet Holy—week, we have yet another vineyard and yet another landowner. This time an absentee landlord, swiping up prime real estate from the land of promise and plenty. Leaving the locals landless and penniless.

Remember that the land is a gift from God, on loan to the people, for the benefit of all. Remember that the land is meant to be preserved in perpetuity as an inheritance from God. Remember that the land which is meant to be redistributed every fifty years so that nobody ever ends up landless and penniless. Remember that the land is meant to embody the very covenant they are celebrating in this Passover Festival: "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of slavery."

The landlord, however, thinks he is in the right. The landlord thinks he has done everything necessary to "keep the peace." He has protected the fruits of his land with a fence and a watchtower. The peasants, whose land he has swiped up from underneath them, are now his tenants. They will take care of things, the landowner thinks, until the plentiful harvest. The landlord thinks he is secure. He thinks he has literally paid the price for peace.

Instead, he has initiated a spiral of inevitable violence with his hostile takeover of peasant land.

Because of the landowner, these peasants-turned-tenants can no longer subsist. On the very land of promise and plenty that is meant to be preserved for them as children of the covenant! In order to survive, these peasants-turned-tenants have no choice but to rebel against their absentee landlord. And the spiral of violence, initiated by the landlord, continues in the revolt of the peasants-turned-tenants.

To the rest of us, the peasant revolt is the part that seems violent. What Jesus is saying, and what the chief priests and elders admit, is that rejection of the covenant initiates the spiral, with devastating consequences.

Inevitably, the chief priests and elders admit, the spiral of violence concludes with a crackdown from the landlord. Who thinks *he* is in the right, and the peasants-turned-tenants are in the wrong. With the backing of the religious elite, who have also strayed far from the covenant, in collusion with Roman corporate interests.

Inevitably, the chief priests and elders admit, the spiral of violence concludes with a crackdown from the absentee landlord. Under the pretext of “keeping the peace.” Leaving multitudes dead, an utterly decimated vineyard, and blood flowing where wine should be pouring.

The point of the parable, Gospel of Matthew version, is to hold up a mirror to the chief priests and the elders of the people, to whom the parable is directed. Under what authority are YOU preaching!? Jesus seems to retort. You, chief priests and elders of the people, you, who are meant to proclaim jubilee, instead you identify most closely with the landowner. Instead, you are wealthy enough to leave vineyards of your own in the hands of peasants-turned tenants, while you tend to religious duties here in Jerusalem.

You, chief priests and elders, are the first to name the massacre that will surely result from this failure to live the covenant.

What the chief priests and elders of the people do not see, Jesus is saying, by choice or by ignorance, is the cost of their identification with the absentee landowner: that they are building up the temple at the expense of the poor.

Jesus calls them on it in this parable, holding up a mirror to the undercurrent of fear and greed and the spiral of violence that perpetuates the chief priests and elders themselves help perpetuate. And he asks them: is this who we really want to be? Is this who God really wants us to be?

Two thousand years later, on this World Communion Sunday, as we re-member the stories of that horrible—yet Holy—week, the same mirror Jesus holds up to the chief priests and the elders of his day reveals our own fear and greed and our own spiral of violence now.

We, too, have lived a horrible week in the life of our nation. Two hundred ten THOUSAND deaths to COVID. A call among violent white supremacists to “stand back and stand by” in the wake of a bitter election. Actual preparation for armed uprising in the wake of November 3. The hospitalization of our own President and the ensuing Twitter tirade against him – I saw it; it was awful! – that became so violent it had to be banned.

Jesus holds up a mirror to us, too, and demands of us, too: is this who we really want to be? Is this who God really wants us to be?

The answer, my friends, must be no.

As hard as it is to step out of the spiral, the answer, my friends, must be no. The answer must be that we come to the table on this World Communion Sunday clinging to the healing and wholeness and hope we find her. Because we know there is too much violence in this world, and we know we are too much a part of that violence, and we know that we do not want to be anymore.

The answer must be that we come to the table on this Peacemaking Sunday clinging to the promise that peace on earth begins with us: with our families and with our co-workers and with our own congregation, and we want to be part of the peace that passes understanding. We want to part of that Great Shalom.

The answer must be that we come to the table broken and suffering, hungry and thirsty, and sometimes self-righteous and self-satisfied, desperate for a second chance.

And the answer must be that we receive it.

Because this is a table of grace. It is a table that takes us as we are and transforms us into who we can become, which is the ultimate outcome of that horrible – yet Holy – week so long ago. Which is what I believe Jesus is trying to offer the chief priests and elders in this parable today. The spiral of violence is *not* the final answer. The resurrection of hope is.

So come to the table, whoever you are, whatever you have done, whatever you have left undone, whatever has been done to you.

The spiral of violence ends here for us in the bread and in the cup, as we re-member the broken body of Christ, and transform this horrible week into a holy meal.

Amen.