“Caught”

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Matthew 21:33-46

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**Matthew 21:33-46**

***33“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. 34When the harvest time had come, he sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his produce. 35But the tenants seized his slaves and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. 36Again he sent other slaves, more than the first; and they treated them in the same way. 37Finally he sent his son to them, saying, ‘They will respect my son.’ 38But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, ‘This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance.” 39So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him. 40Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?” 41They 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.” 42Jesus 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’? 43Therefore 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. 44The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls.” 45When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they realized that he was speaking about them. 46They wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowds, because they regarded him as a prophet.***

Can anyone tell me how that quote goes, about the danger of forgetting history?

Wanting to know *exactly* how it goes, of course I googled it. Here’s what I found from a magazine put out by Virginia Tech College of Liberal Arts and Human Sciences:

“Irish statesman Edmund Burke is often misquoted as having said, “Those who don’t know history are destined to repeat it.”

Spanish philosopher George Santayana is credited with the aphorism, “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it,”

British statesman Winston Churchill wrote, “Those that fail to learn from history are doomed to repeat it.”1

It seems it matters which generation is trying to remember the quote, that affects how we remember it. Myself, I thought it originated with Elie Wiesel, whose book Night, was to become a great warning to the world, saying to forget and allow such atrocities to happen again would be like killing those who died, a second time.

It turns out that learning from a remembered past was not a foreign concept even to Jesus.

Today’s text picks up where we left off last week. Jesus has entered Jerusalem on a donkey, has upturned the money tables at the temple, and returned the next day. Last week Jesus taught them a parable when they were questioning Jesus’ authority. Today’s text is the second parable that Jesus told them that day.

Jesus often communicated with temple authorities, leaders of the faith tradition, using words they would know as learned individuals. The parable today is set in a vineyard, and is a direct use of the scene from Isaiah 5.

Isaiah 5 begins, (Isaiah 5:1b-2)

“My beloved had a vineyard

on a very fertile hill.  
**2**He dug it and cleared it of stones  
    and planted it with choice vines;  
he built a watchtower in the midst of it  
    and hewed out a wine vat in it;”  
he expected it to yield grapes,  
    but it yielded rotten grapes.

The landowner described in the parable is a very good landowner – he has provided a vineyard already planted, a fence to protect it from the animals, a wine press dug to process it, and a watchtower to protect it from human threats.2 Any tenant would be all set. Just as in Isaiah 5, the vineyard was well prepared. It’s no wonder the landowner, and the beloved from Isaiah 5, expected grapes to be harvested.

The next verses in the parable are horrific. In another time we will talk about the easy use of the word slaves in our biblical texts, and how the slaves are always the ones sent into the fray first. Three times the landowner sends people to collect his produce. Three times the tenants completely destroy the messengers, in horrific fashion. Last week the parable talked about authority. This week, notice the tenants aren’t even questioning the authority of the slaves to come and collect. This week the tenants are epitomizing the concept of greed. Even when the landowner sends his son, the tenants dare to cross that cultural barrier and kill the son also, hoping to gain his inheritance.

If this were a movie, there would be a stop action here, looking into the eyes of the landowner as he returns to his vineyard – and cut to commercial.

“What will he do to those tenants?” Jesus asks. Caught up in the drama, the fast paced action, without that commercial, the temple leaders rush back with greed, judgment and punishment still in their hearts: “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.”  And they sit back, certain they have answered correctly, and put this know-it-all Jesus in his place. How dare he come into their temple and try to teach them!

I have to admit it, I’m there too. Are you? In all of my detective shows, those nasty mean tenants don’t win in the end, and that good landowner gets tenants that do right by him. I just gloss over the “put those wretches to a miserable death” part. Just as in Isaiah 5, the landowner expected one thing and got something very different. In Isaiah 5, the vineyard owner “expected it to yield grapes, but it yielded rotten grapes.”

What the chief priests forgot to remember about the whole scene from Isaiah 5, is that the prophet was likening the vineyard owner to God, and prophesying the destruction of Israel because they did not tend the vineyard. (It is very important to mention, especially today, that “Israel” in the Bible does not refer to the current state of Israel.) By answering Jesus the way they did, “put those wretches to a miserable death” they gave themselves away. They just outed themselves as the hypocrites that Jesus was accusing them of being.

Maybe they should have shrugged their shoulders like any school child knows how to do when any answer will be wrong and said, “I don’t know.” Just like last week, they find themselves caught in a dilemma of their own creating.

They have not correctly remembered the past from Isaiah 5, and are caught by their own words, repeating it by hypothetically destroying the tenants in Jesus’ parable.

“What will the landowner do to those tenants?” Jesus asks. “Put those wretches to a miserable death.” Wanting the landowner to be God and therefore the just and loving God that I believe in, I want Jesus’ next words to be something like, “Oh no he won’t!” Jesus will describe the good landowner’s actions as something teachable and redeeming. But he doesn’t. He begins by quoting more from the Psalms this time. Psalm 118 v. 22 and 23 read,

***22****The stone that the builders rejected  
    has become the chief cornerstone.*

***23****This is the Lord’s doing;  
    it is marvelous in our eyes.*

42Jesus 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’? 43Therefore 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.”

Just like last week, authority is given to the one who does the will of God. This week, the kingdom of God will not go to those who are greedy and punish others, but will be given to a people that produce the fruits of the kingdom. Different parable, same gift. The kingdom of God.

It is not until later in the first century, after Jesus’ death, that later witnesses to Jesus’ life began to equate Jesus to the son that is destroyed by the tenants in this parable.

In Acts chapter 4, Paul writes, “**11**This Jesus[[a](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Psalm%20118%3A22%2CPsalm%20118%3A23%2CActs%204%3A11%2C1%20Peter%202%3A7&version=NRSVUE#fen-NRSVUE-27023a)] is ‘the stone that was rejected by you, the builders;  
it has become the cornerstone.’” And in 1 Peter, chapter 2, Peter writes, “**7**This honor, then, is for you who believe, but for those who do not believe, “The stone that the builders rejected has become the very head of the corner,”

Lessons from the past may not always ward off doom, but they can provide insights into the present and even the future. Sometimes the past is remembered and used to heighten the events of something current, as an example from just yesterday, the Israel-Palestine most recent attacks are occurring on the 50 year anniversary of the Yom Kippur War.3

Unparalleled; unprecedented; extraordinary; remarkable; never-before-seen; first time in U.S. history; unrivaled; the most this; the worst that; How many of these phrases have we heard in the news these days? I don’t have to name too many current events for us to understand how the lessons of history have eluded us. I don’t think it’s just me who can hardly catch a breath in-between reports of one appalling event after another. Take a moment here to do just that.

**Without knowing the past, anything new that we try, isn’t necessarily an improvement. It’s just different.** We are in danger of falling off the very same cliff that other societies have fallen off, because we don’t recognize the ways in which humanity has remained constant.

I had a great facebook chat today with a friend, motivated by a memory post of his from five years ago. We were discussing his term The Coming Civil Peace. His original post was reflecting on the number of people who said at the time that they thought we were in the midst of a coming civil war. He commented “Google came up with 153 million results for the phrase "coming civil war" in .63 seconds.” In a very thoughtful piece my friend suggested that just as the conditions for a civil war had been building over time, we need to intentionally build up the conditions for a civil peace. “We need to learn and choose to do something different than those things that led us to such dangerous times as these.”4

Making the appropriate change starts with self-understanding. Not just as individuals, but as a community – any and all communities that we are a part of. No longer is it okay to only worry about ourselves individually and neglect our neighbor. It’s no longer enough to live by the motto “Do no harm.” To be in the world, is to have a neighbor. And we all know what Jesus says about neighbors. There is no action that is too small to have an impact on the spread of the kingdom of God.

Do any of you remember “SomeGoodNews” hosted by John Krasinski? In the early days of the pandemic we were all as frightened as we have been by something so foreign to us. The show was a great way to bring us some comfort and humor, at a time when stoics were saying, “I’m fine, everything is fine, it’s all fine,” when clearly things were not fine. We saw there examples of people doing good things for other people.

There are many sites online where one can find good news, positive affirmations, and other ways to boost our morale.5 One that I found that sounded great is called “Positive News.” This site refers to itself as good journalism about good things, and has sections like “What went right this week?” and “What if everything turns out okay?” I might have to look into that.

As a church community, what is our message? Do we share what went right this week so that people leave church feeling good? Do we share doom and gloom so that people leave feeling motivated to change something? Our job is to share the truth as we see it, as people who trust in the words of scripture from the past to guide us in our actions to spread the word of God, to have trust in the God who overcame death, to believe that humanity is not static and we have the power to impact the world for the better.

Let’s pray…

1<https://liberalarts.vt.edu/magazine/2017/history-repeating.html>

Virginia Tech College of Liberal Arts and Human Sciences has a magazine called illumiNation. This quote is from the 2017 issue entitled Creativity and Innovation, a section called History Repeating.

2<Https://cepreaching.org/commentary/2023-10-02/matthew-2133-46-4/>

3The Yom Kippur War, also known as the Ramadan War, the October War, the 1973 Arab–Israeli War, or the Fourth Arab–Israeli War, was an armed conflict fought from October 6 to 25, 1973, between Israel and a coalition of Arab states led by Egypt and Syria.

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yom_Kippur_War>

4I’m happy to share his piece if he gives me permission. I haven’t asked yet.

5Greater Good in Action <https://ggia.berkeley.edu/>

Positive News <https://www.positive.news/>

Good News Network <https://www.goodnewsnetwork.org/>