

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

Matthew 21:33-46

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“Near and Far”

Rev. Amy Terhune

It’s one of my favorite sketches of all time. But it doesn’t owe its creation to Saturday Night Live or Lucille Ball or Carol Burnett or any of the other greats. No, this sketch belongs to a fuzzy blue monster named Grover, who (back in 1975) wanted to show kids the difference between near and far. So he begins close up to the camera: “This, kids, is near!” Then he runs way back to the back of the stage and hollers out “this is far!!!” Then he runs back up close. “Now, I am near again. Get it? You don’t, huh? Here, I’ll show you again.” Near. Run, run, run. Fa-a-a-r! Run, run, run. Still haven’t got it? Okay, one more time. All in all, Grover runs back and forth demonstrating near and far about a dozen times, and by the end, he is breathless, exasperated, and a little unsteady, ultimately crashing with exhaustion somewhere between near and far. I wanted to show it to you, but Youtube gets a little funny about copyright when I show stuff, so I included the link in the sermon manuscript if you want to watch it for yourself. [clip here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iZhEcRrMA-M>]

I reference the clip as a way of framing our conversation today. In the parable Jesus tells, there seems to be a difference of opinion as to whether the landowner who plants the vineyard is near or far. And in Jesus’ tell, this landowner represents God, begging the question: how near is God? To put this in context, Matthew 21 opens just 5 days before Jesus’ death. Jesus enters Jerusalem on a donkey to the cheers of the crowd and waving palm branches. He cleanses the temple, which really ticks off the powers that be, and then gets into a debate with them over his authority. More about some of that in a few weeks. And then he tells this parable. Needless to say, when all is said and done, it just adds insult to injury where the Pharisees are concerned. The text tells us they’re ready to arrest him, save for the fact that the crowds like him.

And Matthew means for us to get it. After all, it really is confrontational. I mean, it doesn’t take a genius to figure out the basics. God is the vineyard owner (as we’ve said); the servants that are killed and stoned and so forth are the prophets God has sent over time. The son, of course, is Jesus himself. And then there are the tenants. The Pharisees are not obtuse – they know who Jesus is implicating. And they’re offended. *They* didn’t kill the prophets – they’ve atoned for that – and they’re sure as heck not

going to turn over a wealth of tradition and guardianship of the faith to a backwoods carpenter who happens to have enough charisma to impress the rabble. And so they seethe.

Now, as Jesus tells it, the owner of the vineyard has made a considerable investment. He owns the land. He builds a wall to keep out animals. He builds a watchtower, to keep an eye out for danger and to watch the weather. He builds a wine press—the mechanism crucial to turning ordinary grapes into wine—a precious and sought-after commodity in those days. Everyone needed wine back then, even when the economy wasn't so great—one could trade it for anything. Producing wine almost guaranteed that basic needs would always be met—a comfortable though perhaps not luxurious life. All of these things—the wall, the watchtower, the wine-press—cost something to build. The owner of the vineyard gives these sharecroppers a chance at a good life; he invests in their future as well as his own. All that is asked in return is a percentage of the harvest—usually one/seventh back then or about 15%. That's not too terribly bad—many a credit card charge that today. And that's about what our government asks from us in taxes every year, give or take. The point is that the asking is not unreasonable.

Here's where it would be easy to miss the point Jesus is trying to make. Let's ask ourselves: why don't the tenants want to pay the rent? Is it because the harvest was bad? No, the text doesn't say that. Is it because they're just plain greedy? A lot of scholars seem to think so, but I don't really think that's it either—at least, not entirely.

A story was making the rounds several years back about an asteroid that hits the speaker's platform at a New York conference center, and Barack Obama, Mitt Romney, and Jeff Bezos, founder of Amazon and one of the richest men on earth, all arrive in heaven at the same time. They are greeted by the Almighty, who is sitting on his golden throne. First, the Lord speaks to Obama, asking what he believes in. "I believe in universal healthcare and saving the environment," he replies. "Very good," the Almighty says. "Come sit near me." Then he asks Mitt Romney the same question. "I believe in supporting small businesses, lowering taxes, and taking good care of the military," Romney replies. "Excellent," says the Almighty. "Come sit near me." Then God asks Jeff Bezos what he believes. "I believe," Bezos replies, "you're sitting in my chair."

Most of us are not that arrogant. When confronted with the realities of God's provision, we are grateful, and we recognize the investment God has made in our lives, our world, our salvation, ourselves.

But most of us are forgetful. Out of sight, out of mind. Many of us live too comfortably thinking of God as far off – up there, out there, beyond here. What if Jesus' point is that God is near? God is invested. These tenants have been working the vineyard all season. They've weeded among the vines, harvested the fruit, sweated in the sun, stood guard in the night, operated the press, made the wine. They've done a whole lot of hard work, and they've forgotten that none of this would be possible without the land, the wall, the watchtower, and the press. It's pure and simple amnesia! We did the work, so it's ours! That's what they think. They've forgotten the extent of the investment the vineyard owner has made in their well-being. They've forgotten the terms of the covenant. They've forgotten that the owner of the vineyard expects fruit. That's the deal.

Now we may well ask: how could they forget something like that? Shouldn't it be obvious? When the wall and the watchtower and the press are right there in front of their eyes, as near as near can be, how could they forget the owner? But then, perhaps that's the point of the parable. Perhaps we are being reminded of just how easy it is to forget that everything we have is on loan to us from God.

"There are times when all of us try to put ourselves in God's seat. There are times when all of us act as if the world is our fiefdom and we are supreme over all we survey. We forget that everything we have is on loan to us from God. We are temporary tenants. We don't own anything, even though we sometimes act as if we own it all." [adapted from "Rebellion in the Vineyard" by King Duncan, www.Sermons.com.] And we forget the cost—the enormous investment made in our lives and in our salvation. We forget that we're here for a purpose – to share God's work. And when these tenants

receive periodic reminders from servant and son, their response is to keep the landowner distant, far, out. They want to forget.

The tragedy of this is that when we forget God's generosity, God's sacrifice, God's great love and hope for each of us, we forget who we are. When we forget what the owner of the vineyard has invested in us, we forget our worth. We forget our own sacredness and preciousness, as well as the sacredness and preciousness of others. Thus, we are left thinking we are alone, that no one cares, that we just have to get by somehow, that others are just like what we feel like—cardboard cut-outs to be used and tossed aside as convenience dictates. We begin to feel distanced and cut off, especially in a time of pandemic, and we forget the nearness of God.

There's an old story about a man who wandered into a church looking for the pastor for some spiritual guidance. The pastor asked him about his religious background. The man replied, "I went to Sunday School as a child, but I only remember one verse from the Bible, John 3:16: 'God so loved the world that he gave his only FORGOTTEN son that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.'" The man had substituted the word "forgotten" for the word begotten. The sensitive pastor picked up on that and asked the man, "Do you know why God forgot his son?" The man replied, "No." Here's the good news for all of us who fight against and suffer from spiritual amnesia. The pastor said to the man, "God forgot his son because God remembered you." [adapted from "From Rejected To Rejoicing" by King Duncan, www.Sermons.com.]

Today, Christians all over the world unite in celebrating Holy Communion, recognizing that in our differences is the one central truth of Jesus Christ: that no matter how rampant spiritual amnesia runs among humankind, God will never succumb to it. The bread and juice are a tangible and visible vaccine against amnesia, and a concrete reminder of this reality: that Christ, who was broken for us, is present with us now in our brokenness, as near as near can be in all our suffering, remembering us in our need. Thanks be to God. Amen.