

### **Matthew 21:33-46**

Jesus said, "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. 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.

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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. \*

The news that the president and first lady have tested positive for COVID-19 is not far from our thoughts this morning. There is no doubt that many people, perhaps you, who reacted with a measure of satisfaction upon learning what happened last Friday. While I doubt any of us would wish a positive test result on anybody, many would say that this diagnosis is quite appropriate given the circumstances. Some would say God is taking revenge on the president for downplaying the risks and presiding over the infection of over 7-million and the deaths of over 200-thousand Americans.

On the other hand, there are many men and women of faith who very sincerely believe the president was in fact sent by God to make fundamental changes to American society and have been extremely pleased at what he has accomplished over the past four years. While I doubt any of you hearing this would agree with such an assessment, not acknowledging that many of our fellow citizens are and have been upset with the direction our country has been going for decades would be a mistake.

Isn't it strange? How can Christians, reading the same Bible, praying to the same God have such diverse and conflicting ideas about our nation? Abraham Lincoln pointed out this same division in his second inaugural address toward the end of the Civil War. During the American Revolution, Christians were horribly divided on the question of independence. You may be surprised to learn that back then, Presbyterians took a leading role in utilizing our faith to justify the war. Many of our Episcopal friends back then took the opposite view.

Which side is right? Which side is wrong? Or are things that simple? Lincoln went on to observe that while both sides prayed to the same God, God did not answer the prayers of either side in full. And, as we know, hundreds of thousands died during the Civil War, most dying of disease, not bullets.

So what does this history lesson have to do with the scriptures? Everything. Listen to the prophet Isaiah: My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts. (Isaiah 55:8-9). In short, pretending that we know what God is doing, what God's purpose is in our current situation, is foolish in the extreme. No one who follows Jesus Christ should presume to perfectly understand him or what he wants, much less try to impose one particular interpretation of his life and teachings on others. Millions have died and suffered terribly over the centuries because certain so-called Christian leaders have tried to impose their understanding of scripture on others.

So, is God at work in the current events of our nation? Certainly. However, it would be extremely arrogant of us to presume that we know exactly what God is doing or why God is doing it.

Jesus was making that very point in today's scripture. Here once again we find Jesus teaching when various religious leaders of the Jewish community were present. At the core of Jesus' debate with these leaders was how we human beings are to understand God's Law and how it should apply to us.

Back then and even today, we have radically differing views of Law and the role it should play in our lives. For some, perhaps for many, the Law is understood as a rigid set of rules which should be interpreted literally and followed exactly as written. The primary function of the Jewish leadership was to direct people in how to apply the Law as literally as possible to the situations they were dealing with in life.

Now in many ways, there's nothing wrong with following this approach to Law. All of us need some kind of order in our lives. Most people do not function well in an atmosphere of chaos. We like having a pretty good idea of how our days are going to run when we get up and by extension what the weeks and months ahead are going to look like. It is good to have a lot routine in life so every moment is not a new challenge requiring us to constantly think up how to respond to a crisis. Having order, having a routine provides a level of stability which in turn gives us extra time to respond to unusual situations because unusual situations are or should be rare.

Similarly, the Jewish leadership thought, order, stability, control were all desirable objectives. From the beginning of the scriptures, God shows that God brings order out of chaos. The Law is a gift to us to make life predictable, consistent, and fair.

Let us be clear, Jesus had no objection to the Law. He often said that his purpose was not to break the Law but fulfill it. However, in his ministry he constantly found himself confronting the question, whether the Law was made to benefit people or are people made to serve the Law.

There is a very human desire for order and stability. Likewise there was a fear back then and very much a fear today that if we start bending the Law to suit our individual needs, pretty soon the Law will become meaningless. It will break and with it all order and stability and control.

Do you remember the musical, "Fiddler on the Roof?" In it, Tevye, a Jewish Russian milkman struggled to balance his traditions, rules, and Laws with the desires of his three oldest daughters as they sought to find husbands. The eldest fell in love with a poor tailor as opposed the rich butcher whom Tevye wanted her to marry, a marriage arranged of course by the matchmaker. Tevye bent his tradition of using matchmakers, and accepted the marriage because he saw his daughter's love for the tailor and he loved his daughter. His second daughter fell in love with a man who was a revolutionary, trying to overthrow the Russian government. Her fiancé was caught and exiled to Siberia. She decided to join him in exile, requiring her to leave her family and village. Again, Tevye,

out of love for his daughter agreed, again bending his tradition of keeping the family together in the same village, and blessed his second daughter's marriage.

But then, Tevye faced his greatest challenge. His third daughter fell in love with a Christian man which was an anathema to his Jewish faith. Jews who married Christians became non-persons. They were, as far as the community was concerned, dead. The third daughter begged Tevye to accept her new marriage but he could not. He said, "If I bend anymore, I will break." So Tevye, feeling love and enormous pain and sorrow, nevertheless turned his back on his third daughter and refused to speak to her ever again. Law and tradition triumphed over love and family.

Nonetheless, can't we understand Tevye's feelings? Don't all of us have, somewhere in our lives, certain beliefs or principles we simply will not violate? Aren't there lines in life we will never, ever cross, regardless of love? Are there Laws more important than love?

But Jesus' ministry sought not to diminish the Law, or encourage people to break the Law, but instead to remind us that the Law exists as proof of the Love God has for us. With every rule, with every law, with every time we teach or guide or correct someone, we should be doing so not because we are following a rule, but on the basis of love. In all his encounters with the Jewish leadership, Jesus reminded them that they were forgetting that the root of the Law is love. Law without love is not God's Law.

So in Jesus' parable about the tenants of the vineyard, we see the owner loving his disobedient tenants again and again, sending his representatives to them over and over again, not even sparing his son. The owner acted with love. The tenants did not. At the end of the parable Jesus presents himself as a cornerstone rejected by the builders on which they will stumble and fall. Isn't it interesting that the cornerstone Jesus is talking about is the cornerstone of love? Who thinks of love as being a problem, but back then and even now, love, or the lack of love, is a huge stumbling block in our lives.

The Jewish establishment realized Jesus was casting them as the wicked tenants. Jesus was calling them the builders who would stumble and fall on his cornerstone of love. What was constantly bringing them down in Jesus' view was their lack of love — their mistaking Law for being somehow superior to love.

We say that Jesus is love. Yet for just about all of us, there are times when we become like Tevye and say there are situations when our law, customs, or traditions are more important than love. Love, paradoxically, can be a stumbling block. Therefore even for us, Jesus can be a stumbling block.

The powerful religious leaders got angry at Jesus because he spoke the truth to them and they did not like it. The truth Jesus spoke was that God's Law can only be understood in the context of God's love. Without love, the Law is pointless.

And really, isn't that fundamental truth at the heart of so many of our disputes in life? When we say we seek to speak truth to power, can't the differences be understood in terms of Love versus Law?

Consider the many conflicts roiling our society today. Our national discussion about racial inequality is really about God's relentless and equal love for all human beings against ideas enshrined in our laws that permit discrimination on the basis of skin color, gender, wealth, education, and so many other human factors. What is our health care debate about? Isn't it about God love for all human beings requiring every person to have access to a minimal level of health care, regardless of one ability to pay for it? It is wonderful that there are medical techniques and treatments that can quickly help certain individuals recover from Covid-19 and other diseases. However, shouldn't we be asking why all people don't have access to them? Or consider the debate over taxation. Even Jesus told us we had to pay taxes. But doesn't God's Love require us to base taxation on the ability to pay, so those with more should pay a greater share? We have rules that give the wealthy huge tax breaks, but are those rules rooted in love?

But friends, even greater than the truth Jesus speaks to the powerful of society is the truth Jesus speaks to each of us. I pray that you never forget that you are the most powerful person on earth. Yes, you! Not the president, not the corporate chairperson, not the Pope, you! Why do I say that? Because every one of us has the potential to change the world for the better! Every one of us has the ability to make a difference with at least one person which could affect the world in ways we will never know about. God's truth about love, the truth Jesus speaks to us, means that when we fully accept and understand God's love for us, all the rules we bind ourselves with will disappear!

Yes, all of us have created our own internal sets of Laws that constrain us as much as Tevye. We have all drawn lines of doubt and fear in our own heads which we will not challenge. We all tell ourselves "I can't" when God's love is telling us that we can. In short we have created our own stumbling blocks and God's love expressed by Jesus Christ wants to help us remove them.

Let us move forward in life with confidence, trusting not in our own self-made rules that bind us to self-defeating ways of thinking and living, but instead trust in the endless Love of God which seeks only to build us up and help us achieve everything we set our minds on and devote our considerable abilities to. There is no need to stumble. All we need to do is love. Love ourselves, love each other, love God.

I say these words in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.