

I have heard people say (and have thought myself) that the Bible can be hard to understand. Perhaps that's as it should be; after all, it's an ancient book made up of ancient books—an anthology of stories about the people of God and how they became the people of God. From the murky depths of the creation story through the vivid imagery of the end times, the Bible is more than we sometimes give it credit for being. So finding it hard to understand is, well, understandable. And so we try to find ways of simplifying it or the idea of it so we can feel that we have some grasp of what it's all about. We might think of it as completely true and factual, a history and science manual set down by God, never to be changed or interpreted or challenged. We might think of it as allegorical or metaphorical, entirely symbolic with no historical element at all. We might think of it as God's "answer book", claiming that we can open it randomly and find the answer to the questions we have or problems we're trying to solve. Or we might not think of it much at all outside of church. We might think that we are unable to understand it because we're not educated or haven't been to seminary.

But what most of us can agree on is that the Bible is a complicated book, more complicated than we're ready to deal with. The more I read and study and discuss it with others, not only does it seem more complex but also richer and more interesting and nuanced as well. I'm not alone in this, nor is this a modern phenomenon—from the time that the Torah and other texts that we think of as "Old Testament" began to form a canon—that is, an accepted set of texts—people have found it difficult to pin down absolutely what meaning particular stories might have. What began as oral tradition became written texts, with the stories probably being written down and retold by different groups of people over time. We end up with a mishmash of literature: poems, stories, laws and rules, prophecy, all sorts of different kinds of writings. If we try to read them all the same way or understand them all in the same light, well, we're not going to be very successful, are we? So we have to take into account things like, when was this written? Who was it written by? Who was the audience at the time it was written and how might they have understood it?

By the time of Jesus it had become practice for interpreters of the scriptures to create what is called a *midrash*, sort of a set of commentaries and interpretations of a particular passage that then became attached to that passage as time passed. With the exile (that happened hundreds of years earlier) the practice of the Jewish religion—centered on the Temple, which was no longer accessible—became focused on reading and interpretation of scripture; and over time it became the practice that not only were religious professionals allowed to interpret but anyone in a synagogue could and was expected to read and interpret passages of scripture.

We see this often in the NT, particularly in the gospels and in Paul. Jesus often has the words of OT scripture on his lips, whether you believe he actually spoke them or whether him saying certain things made for a good story. (for the record, I think there are places in the gospels which record things that Jesus actually said, even if it was a memory of him saying it, and I also believe things are attributed to Jesus that he didn't actually say but are useful in the context in which they were written. In other words, I think some "Jesus quotes" are authentically Jesus and some are not.)

Today's passage from Matthew is a good example of OT scripture coming from the mouth of Jesus—and it is particularly evident because what he was quoted as quoting comes from the Isaiah passage we heard Joanna read, a passage known as the song of the vineyard. It begins

Let me sing for my beloved my love-song concerning his vineyard: My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. ²He 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...

and goes on to tell of a vineyard overrun not with good grapes but wild grapes. All of the work the beloved has done is for nothing.

What is the beloved's response? To tear down the wall, destroy the hedge, basically make the vineyard unusable. At the end of the passage it is revealed that the beloved is the Lord and the vineyard is Israel and the planting is Judah; where God expected justice and righteousness to grow and flourish there was only destruction and sorrow.

Jesus interprets this passage for his time:

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 it was time for harvest the landowner sent a series of servants to gather the harvest, but they were all killed by the tenants--- including the landowner's son, who they killed in order to gain the inheritance.

The difference here is that Jesus is in dialogue with the people around him—scribes, Pharisees, probably his disciples—and he asks *them* what will happen when the landowner returns.

Now, this is where we begin to ask questions. How are Jesus' listeners hearing this story? Why has Matthew (or the writer of Matthew's gospel) included this particular story, and who was *his* audience? Scribes and Pharisees, who are thinking that they are God's chosen people, might have heard this story as a condemnation of their enemies—aka the Roman empire. Thus their answer to the question "what does the landowner do?" is that the tenants—the Romans—will be thrown into the fire. (and let me interject here that, while we can't *know* what these people from the past were thinking, we can guess or at least speculate, as we dig into the text to find our own meaning.)

When we go back to the original song of the vineyard in Isaiah, we've already seen that God is the beloved and the vineyard is Israel and the wild grapes represents Judah. God gathered a people and tended them and nurtured them but they didn't develop as God hoped. In fact, when this was written there was a situation in which the disparity between the wealthy landowners and the poor tenant farmers was very great; the very next line in Isaiah after the passage we read says *Ah, you who join house to house, who add field to field, until there is room for no one but you, and you are left to live alone in the midst of the land!* -- which is very clearly an injunction against those who would gather wealth to themselves and leave others to suffer in poverty.

This is the backstory of the beginning of Jesus' parable, intended to remind the hearers of the parable and the readers of the gospel of this history. In the story, as I mentioned earlier, Jesus is talking to Pharisees, scribes, disciples and others who were around; and the question of "what would the landowner do" was asked to, and answered by, the Pharisees and scribes. Based on their knowledge and expectations they answered *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.* "Those" wretches, those wretched Romans. Only Jesus has another idea: the Jewish religious leaders of the day are the ones who will be thrown into the fire—because of their complicity with the Roman leaders. Jesus' hearers heard *you will be vindicated and saved from the enemy* while Matthew's readers might have heard that they were the other tenants who would produce a better harvest.

That leads us, of course, to where we always end up: what do these stories mean for us, today, in the 21st century? What can we learn from what was going on at the time of the Isaiah text as well as the interaction between Jesus and his hearers (and particularly the scribes and Pharisees?)

To me there's a clear parallel between Isaiah and us today. We live in a time in which there is a great disparity between the wealthy and the not wealthy. The top 20% of the population owns or controls 85% of overall wealth, with 1% of the population in America owning or controlling 42.7% of the financial wealth; while the bottom 80% owns or controls 15% of the overall wealth and 7% of the financial wealth. Wages are stagnant and have been for many years and the wealthy have most of the political power which enables them to make laws in their favor. While having money and wealth in themselves is not a bad thing, the desire to own more and more and control more and more is detrimental to society as a whole; this is the reason behind God's injunction against "joining house to house and field to field." (and if you don't think the Bible is political, just read these kinds of texts!)

In the passage from Matthew the problem is not so much wealth—though that is a problem; but here Jesus seems to be criticizing the religious leaders of his day for taking part in the Roman system—a system that was particularly hard on the poor-- while holding themselves up as righteous due to their adherence to certain parts of the law. Make no mistake: Jesus was not against the law, in fact he was a good Jew himself who went to synagogue and probably made sacrifices when it was time and generally practiced the religion he was raised in. Jesus' problem with the Jewish religious leaders was not their Jewishness *it was their hypocrisy* he had a problem with. Their playing along with a system that hurt the people who they were supposed to be taking care of.

Today there seems to be a disconnect between some Christians and the faith they are supposed to be living out. There are faith leaders and followers who are caught up in the American lifestyle with its pursuit of wealth for wealth's sake—for example, the prosperity movement which teaches that wealth is a sign of God's favor, that if you give enough or do enough God will reward you financially. There are those religious leaders who are caught up in gaining political power through wealth and through supporting a certain political candidate or party platform—regardless of whether the candidate is faithful or if the platform is ultimately good for society. Who want to make our society in their own image which all too often is not God's image.

I am pretty sure that God calls us to love everyone—to love our neighbors as ourselves—but how can that be lived out when we are caught up in a system that is grounded in the notion that brown people are less than white people? That poor people deserve to be poor? That calls itself *classless* but in reality is anything but? To love someone as I love myself means that I wouldn't require or pronounce judgement on anyone unless I'm willing to judge myself the same way. To love someone as I love myself means that the *I've got mine* mentality is sinful—yes, I said it—and that gathering wealth to ourselves—more wealth than we need—and voting for candidates who promote policies that increase wealth for a few and increase hardship on the many—is sinful. To love someone as I love myself means putting their needs ahead of our own and cutting them the slack we cut ourselves when we mess up.

The Christian church is in a mess today, in part at least because we've grown too insular and full of ourselves. We think in terms of "inside" and "outside" of the church, with those of us on the inside being the good people and those outside of the church as bad people—sometimes even unconsciously. In reality God created the world for all people and Jesus Christ came for all people; there really should be no *inside* or *outside* but everything together as the kingdom of God. All people, all of humanity belongs in this kingdom of God. The church was created to bring together people of all kinds but somewhere we've lost our way and the larger society doesn't find us credible any more. It is up to us, not society, to reestablish that credibility.

That is my purpose, that is my goal—reaching out in love, acting with integrity and thinking kingdom of God rather than "church insider". Thinking of a vineyard that produces healthy fruit, enough for

everyone and everyone having just enough—not too little, not too much. A vineyard of justice, forgiveness, and hope for my neighbors and myself. Amen.