

Series: Key Moments

February 1, 2015

Title: Whose Garden?

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Text: Matthew 21:33-46

The Parable of the Tenants

Storytelling:

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They gathered on snowy ground inside the barbed wire fences of Auschwitz to commemorate the liberation of the camp by the Allies 70 years ago. Old men pulled up their sleeves to show their tattoos: identification numbers they had been given as teenagers caught up in the death camps of the Nazis. They had somehow survived in a place where more than a million Jews were systematically slaughtered – many of them within hours of arriving in the camp.

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Survivor Marcel Tuchman told how people were lined up and – one by one – were given the “thumb left” or the “thumb right.” He re-enacts the gesture with his gloved hand as he tells the story. When he reached the front of the line, the camp doctor Joseph Mengele looked at him and gave him the “thumb left.” But for each survivor how many were there who got the “thumb right” and never left the camp alive?

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How important are those stories? Without them – without the voices, the faces, the gestures, the tears – the horror of Auschwitz becomes a collection of mind-numbing statistics that are eventually filed away and forgotten. It takes a story to make us understand what happened and somehow connect the dots so that hopefully it never happens again.

A supremely dangerous story:

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Matthew tells us that the day after Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey and was hailed as King of the Jews by the masses, He chose to tell a story. It would prove to be the most dangerous story He ever told, leading to His crucifixion less than a week later.

To understand the importance – and danger – of this story we need to remember that Jesus recounted it in the great Temple just a few days before Passover. Fellow Jews from all over the

world had gathered to celebrate Israel's Exodus Journey from slavery to the Promised Land. On Passover Night they would re-enact the ancient story, right down to the food they ate.

Secondly, we need to remember that Jesus had, the day before, presented Himself in a cryptic way as the long-awaited King who would lead Israel on a New Exodus to victory over their enemies. As He stood in the Temple to tell His little story, people would be weighing every word for deeper meaning. They would be connecting the dots between the ancient Exodus and their own desperate times. They would be listening to see what the King would do next. And for those who were deeply invested in preserving the status quo, the story would tell whether this Jesus should be allowed to live or be condemned to die.

The Parable of the Tenants:

Like the story we considered last week, this one also featured a landowner and workers. In this story the workers were not hired by the day, but had rented the owner's vineyard for the entire season.

Here's the story:

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Matthew 21:33-40 NIV

"Listen to another parable: There was a landowner who planted a vineyard. He put a wall around it, dug a winepress in it and built a watchtower. Then he rented the vineyard to some farmers and moved to another place. ³⁴ When the harvest time approached, he sent his servants to the tenants to collect his fruit.

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³⁵ "The tenants seized his servants; they beat one, killed another, and stoned a third. ³⁶ Then he sent other servants to them, more than the first time, and the tenants treated them the same way. ³⁷ Last of all, he sent his son to them. 'They will respect my son,' he said.

³⁸ "But when the tenants saw the son, they said to each other, 'This is the heir. Come, let's kill him and take his inheritance.' ³⁹ So they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him.

⁴⁰ "Therefore, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?"

Connecting the Dots

An old story retold:

It turns out that Jesus' parable was actually the *retelling* of one of ancient Israel's famous stories – a parable found in the Book of Isaiah. Isaiah's parable goes like this:

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Isaiah 5:1-2 NIV

*"I will sing for the one I love
a song about his vineyard:
My loved one had a vineyard
on a fertile hillside.*

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*² He dug it up and cleared it of stones
and planted it with the choicest vines.
He built a watchtower in it
and cut out a winepress as well.
Then he looked for a crop of good grapes,
but it yielded only bad fruit."*

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Isaiah tells the story of Israel from Exodus to Promised Land. God has taken His people out of slavery and planted them in a good place where they can be loyal to Him and accomplish His great plan of being a light to the rest of the world. That is what Isaiah has in mind when he speaks of God hoping that they will produce "a crop of good grapes."

But Isaiah's message is that something went wrong with the Exodus Story. The grapevines have reverted to a wild, inedible state. The Owner of the vineyard receives nothing for all of his pains.

Isaiah then asks a question of his listeners:

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Isaiah 5:3-4 NIV

*"Now you dwellers in Jerusalem and people of Judah,
judge between me and my vineyard.
⁴ What more could have been done for my vineyard
than I have done for it?
When I looked for good grapes,
why did it yield only bad?"*

Note the unmistakable similarities between Isaiah's and Jesus' parables. Both involve the building and planting of a vineyard, complete with wall, winepress and watchtower. In both

stories the owner is cheated out of his investment. And finally, both parables end with a burning question: "What should the owner do?"

The owner's response:

Both stories end badly for those who cheated their owners. In Isaiah's story, the owner tears down the vineyard: a stunning depiction of what would happen to Jerusalem a century and a half later.

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Isaiah 5:5-6 NIV

*"Now I will tell you
what I am going to do to my vineyard:
I will take away its hedge,
and it will be destroyed;
I will break down its wall,
and it will be trampled.
⁶I will make it a wasteland,
neither pruned nor cultivated,
and briers and thorns will grow there.
I will command the clouds
not to rain on it."*

This national catastrophe was deeply etched in the minds of Jesus' listeners. Never again had Israel enjoyed the freedom and power that it took for granted in Isaiah's time. Instead, the city had been burned to the ground and leveled; the Temple was no more; the people who survived had been carried into exile.

When Jesus *retells* this story in a new way, He is warning that *exactly the same fate* awaits God's People unless they change their ways. His audience, in answering the question of what the owner should do with the wicked tenants, says it all:

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Matthew 21:41 NIV

"He will bring those wretches to a wretched end," they replied, "and he will rent the vineyard to other tenants, who will give him his share of the crop at harvest time."

In Jesus' story, the great crime committed by the tenants is that they had completely forgotten to whom the vineyard actually belonged. Time and again they had the opportunity to welcome the owner's servants and fulfill their obligations to the owner. Those servant-messengers included Isaiah the prophet who told this story in the first

place! But they had fallen into the trap of thinking that everything God had done *was just for them*. They forgot that *they were in the Promised Land to fulfill a greater purpose*.

They were meant to be “a light to the Gentiles.” They were meant to be the vanguard of God’s blessing for the entire world. Instead, they came to see the land, the city, even the Temple, as their own domain. They ran the show and didn’t need God sending anyone to tell them differently!

A timeless temptation!

It’s just as easy for us to fall into the same trap today. We can decide to follow Jesus. We can truly believe that He rose from the dead. We can ask and receive God’s forgiveness. We can gladly embrace New Life and the joy of the Holy Spirit. But then what...?

What happens when God speaks to us – through His Word or perhaps through the caring words of a friend – and reminds us that He alone owns the vineyard that is our life? What happens when we have to choose between our desires and God’s desires? Who runs the show? What happens when He calls us to bear fruit for Him – to make sacrifices for the sake of others? What happens when we come face to face with the reality that we no longer belong to ourselves?

Whose Garden?

Jesus’ story concludes with His own stern warning:

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Matthew 21:42-44 NIV

Jesus said to them, “Have you never read in the Scriptures:

*“The stone the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone;
the Lord has done this,
and it is marvelous in our eyes’?”*

⁴³ “Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit. ⁴⁴ Anyone who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; anyone on whom it falls will be crushed.”

Jesus begins here by quoting from Psalm 118, the same Psalm that the pilgrims sang a day ago when He entered Jerusalem as a king on a donkey. But now the words speak of rejection by the builders. The tenants who killed the owner’s son in the story are now the builders of the Temple itself, who are rejecting the King “who comes in the name of the LORD.” As a result, God will – like the owner of the vineyard – take His kingdom away from

them and give it to a willing world. The cornerstone that they have rejected will be their own downfall!

Cornerstone:

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A few weeks ago I described for you the immense cornerstones that linked together the vast retaining walls of the Temple. Now Jesus is saying that *He is that cornerstone*. The place of God's Presence in this world rests in Him alone. He alone links the old and the new story of God and His salvation of the world.

In a few days the rulers of Jerusalem will indeed reject Him, "throwing him out of the vineyard" by having Him crucified outside the walls of Jerusalem. They will give a sigh of relief: their realm is once again safe and secure. The heretic is dead. No interference from prophets or messiahs. But they will have totally missed the boat. Their action will merely confirm the path to the tragic events of A.D. 70 when the Romans destroy the city and its Temple, and bring their entire world to an end.

No wonder that the ruling elite took such great offence at this story and its application:

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Matthew 21:45-46 NIV

When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard Jesus' parables, they knew he was talking about them. ⁴⁶ They looked for a way to arrest him, but they were afraid of the crowd because the people held that he was a prophet.

In many ways, the die was cast once Jesus told this parable in the Temple courtyard. His secret identity was out in the open. He was God's Son come to receive God's Kingdom from the tenants. And they would have none of it.

Whose Garden?

How important is it that Holocaust survivors tell their stories? Just ask them, and they will tell you that they tell the stories so that the unthinkable horror of the Holocaust won't happen again. The stories connect the dots between that dark time and our own. They make us look inside ourselves; they remind us to be diligent.

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Jesus' story did the same thing: it connected the dots between two dangerous times and challenged people to not let the unthinkable happen again. Sadly, the story went unheeded and the disaster eventually came. But His story still sounds its warning – this time to you and me. Will we make the same mistake as those who fell into the trap of thinking that

God's blessings and protection were *their possession*? Will we forget that we are here to be God's light in a dark world? Will we resist when God calls us to give a portion of our time, our money and our effort back to Him?

The next time you are faced with temptation, who will win? Who will decide which way you go? Will it be you? Or will it be the One Who created you and rescued you?

Whenever the path seems confused and the choices before us seem conflicted, all we have to do is look for the Cornerstone. He is the One – the only One – Who holds everything together.