

Attending Church: Responsibility

*A sermon preached by Emily Hull McGee on Matthew 21:33-46
on October 22, 2023, with First Baptist Church on Fifth, Winston-Salem, NC*

I.

Over these past few weeks, we've been looking together in the parables of the Gospel of Matthew, listening to Jesus use these short, enigmatic stories intended to disrupt, provoke, and unsettle us so that we can understand a bit more about what it means to be 'tenders' in this world. Last week, we listened together to the first of three parables from the final discourse of parables in Matthew's gospel. Remember in these three parables, we begin the movements of the week we call Holy Week. Jesus has entered Jerusalem and made his way to the temple, with words and actions of instruction and correction to the religious leaders he finds there. As we're moving through the parables of Matthew and today's parable in particular, it is vitally important to remember Matthew's unique lens as a writer of the Jesus story. That's where we're starting today.

II.

Of all the four gospel writers, Matthew was most concerned with connecting the fulfillment of the prophecies of ancient Israel with the person of Jesus. Time and time again, you'll hear Matthew referencing the Hebrew Scriptures, or what Christians call the Old Testament, with sayings like, "as it is written," or "it has been said." Matthew goes to great lengths to tie Jesus to the lineage of Abraham and David, to put language on Jesus' lips reaffirming his Jewishness. "I have come not to abolish the law," Matthew's Jesus says clearly, "but to fulfill it, to reconfigure it, to preserve it."

But lest we misunderstand this particular emphasis of Matthew to mean that somehow Jesus is anti-Jewish, we would be gravely mistaken.

Jesus was a Jew, and that mattered deeply to Matthew's telling of the Jesus story! For Matthew, there are no two separate groups: Jews and Christians. That would be vastly oversimplified. There are Jews and Gentiles (non-Jewish people) of varying perspectives: those who understand Jesus as the Messiah, the anointed Son of God long-prophesied, and those who didn't. In Matthew's perspective, the group that will lead the way in Judaism is the group who follows Jesus, not that Judaism itself is going to be replaced. Frankly, Matthew dreamed of a gathered assembly or a church in which Jews and Gentiles would gather together, study together, fellowship together, flourish together.¹

Thus, Matthew's sharpest critique is squarely aimed at the elite religious leaders – those who held and abused their religious power, like the Pharisees and Sadducees. Given what we've seen unfolding in the Middle East this month, I trust that you understand how vitally important it is to listen even more wisely and closely to the context of our religious texts, being careful not to apply our rather dualistic 21st century lenses that would suggest it's either this or that to these ancient texts rich with different nuance than we'd bring.

III.

“Listen to another parable,” Jesus says to the religious leaders that challenged his authority. “There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a wine press in it, and built a watchtower.” Given what we now consider about Matthew, we should remember that Jesus's listeners – those religious leaders he often pressed against – would recognize this

¹ This material on the Jewishness of Jesus and Matthean distinctives was taught to me by my brilliant and wise New Testament professor, Dr. Diane Lipsett, who, in her lectures on the subject, quoted from Donald Senior, “Directions in Matthean Studies,” in *The Gospel of Matthew in Current Study*, ed., David E. Aune [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001], 5-21; 19.

story immediately from the Book of Isaiah. Let me read to you the opening words of Isaiah 5.

This framing would be as familiar as if someone said: “Listen. There were ships of European citizens who came to “the new world,” formed 13 colonies, stole humans from Africa and displaced indigenous people to build them, created a new government, declared independence, won a war, and flew a red, white, and blue flag as a symbol of liberty.” We would know exactly what land, what people, what history, what story is being told, right? So too was it with Jesus’s hearers, who immediately heard the allegories of the parable, grasped the symbolism, and understood that Jesus was referring to Isaiah, and that the allegory equates God with the vineyard owner; the people of Israel, the vineyard.²

But here’s the twist: instead of extrapolating on the meaning of the landowner, or the vineyard, or the grapes, Jesus shifts the focus immediately. Yes, the hearers would have the words of Isaiah and Israel, the vineyard, in their view, but remember what happens next. “Then [the landowner] leased [the vineyard] to **tenants** and went away.” Immediately, the focus lands squarely on the tenants. The problem isn’t that the vineyard doesn’t produce grapes, but rather that the tenants were terrible! At harvest time, they abused, harassed, and killed the landowner’s slaves, time and time again. And when the landowner assumed his tenants would never harm his son, oh, he was wrong. “This is the heir!,” they say with glee. “Let’s kill him and we’ll get the inheritance!”

Within the allegorical or symbolic parameters of the parable, it’s fair to ask of it what it says about an absentee or naive landowner who seemingly

² Thomas Long, *Matthew, Westminster Bible Companion*, p244.

fails to protect his workers, what it means that the landowner chooses vulnerable love over violence when things go awry, what it says about how the Israelites treat those who enter the space they occupy, what it says about the endless spiral of violence where land, inheritance, honor, and power are right at the center.

Yet if we just stay with the allegory, I think we'll miss an opportunity to be provoked as the parable invites us to be provoked, to be unsettled as Jesus wants us to be unsettled, to be disturbed as Jesus invites us to be disturbed. . We could too easily map this onto a people, a place, a situation far from our own, and keep ourselves at an arm's length away. We could look back with honesty over our Christian history, of crusades and genocides and slavery and a Holocaust, and wonder again what perceived ownership of the vineyard does to humans, how it causes a heightened awareness of threat and fear. We could lament all the prophets who came to the vineyard and were cast out: Dr. King, Oscar Romero, the list goes on. We could call out the tenants' "massive misunderstanding of squatter's rights," as one scholar said, in a vineyard which always belongs to God and was never theirs to begin with.³ Or if we're feeling righteous in our anger, we could layer this parable on top of a familiar situation closer to home – casting the wicked tenants as astray leaders of a political party or power-hungry leaders of a certain Baptist Convention in the South – all unable or unwilling to hold space for others which leads them to miss the entire point in the first place. And somehow, in so doing, we find ourselves awash in gratitude, as the Pharisee said of the tax collector, "thank God I am not like them."

IV.

³ Thanks to Pulpit Fiction for the great phrase, "massive misunderstanding of squatter's rights": <https://www.pulpitfiction.com/notes/proper22a>

Good biblical study, my preaching professor taught us, doesn't stop when answering the question, "what does the text say?" Rather, it demands we wrestle with the question, "what does the text ask us to do?"

So what does the parable of the wicked tenants ask us to do? Here's the clue, I think: "Therefore I tell you," Jesus says, "the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces its fruits." The kingdom of God is for the fruitful! The good news of God's dream for this world cannot be trusted in the hands of those who would police its borders, or kick out the 'other,' or miss the point entirely. No, the good news of God's dream for this world is to be entrusted in the hands of the **fruitful**. Those whose lives are filled with evidence of good news! Those who have receipts! Those who are doers of the word, not just hearers of the word! Those who tend the seeds! Those who bear and share fruit!

So friends, go and be fruitful, Jesus asks us! Go and bear good fruits of God's kingdom.

Love for God and neighbor.

Joy in spite of it all.

Peace, chosen and practiced, in the face of war.

Patience extended freely to those around us.

Kindness, even when it hasn't first been extended to us.

Generosity in all things, for it breeds goodness.

Faithfulness in and through the doubts we surely carry.

Gentleness as posture and lens in an increasingly-angry world.

Self-control to tether and ground us beyond the moment we're living.

These are the fruits Paul proclaims that are from the Spirit, indicators and evidence that God has breathed on and in and through the one who

shares them. They aren't just allegorical, symbolic like bananas and grapes and figs of a life we should think about. No, these are the practices we should tend! Practicing love, practicing joy, practicing peace... tending a fruitful life. St. Francis understood that these fruits had to be cultivated, practiced, insisted upon. "Lord, make me an **instrument**," he says, "an instrument of your peace. Where there is hatred, let me sow love. Where there is injury, pardon. Doubt, faith. Despair, hope. Darkness, light. Sadness, joy."⁴ Living these fruits and tending them regularly lead to a fruitful life.

V.

If we put ourselves in God's vineyard, we must understand that if fruitfulness is the requirement, then humility is the posture. Those fruits must be held and practiced with humility, for when the church starts talking about fruits, we may be misunderstood. Like author and poet Ross Gay wrote about in his book, *The Book of Delights*: "It might betray something about my religiosity," he said, "that when I saw the announcement on the church's marquee 'FORBIDDEN FRUIT CREATES MANY JAMS,' I did not for even half a second consider jam meaning problem, jam meaning blockage, jam meaning trouble (nor did I immediately consider jam meaning party or celebration). I thought they were having a jam sale fundraiser. Which, in retrospect, I've never seen, though it's a good idea."⁵

Our humility is necessary not just for ease of understanding, but for self-reflection to ask ourselves: "am I complicit in the vineyard?"

This week, I had the always-welcomed opportunity to step away from the church house just for a bit and hear my friend, mentor, professor and

⁴ St. Francis's Prayer

⁵ Ross Gay, *The Book of Delights*, p147.

founding Dean, Dr. Bill Leonard, preach at Wake Forest Divinity School's weekly chapel service.⁶

Among the many nuances of his sermon, Dr. Leonard spoke of his experiences on Wake Forest's recent committee on Slavery, Race, and Memory Project.⁷ He told of Wake Forest's third president, Washington Manly Wingate, president, professor, and pastor of the Wake Forest Baptist Church – the one on the old campus in Wake County. Records of the church membership in that era around 1865 tell of the church's Black congregation, including, as the records list, "Wingate's Hannah, Wingate's Isaac, Wingate's Jennie, Wingate's Charlotte." "Their master/slave connection was so all-encompassing," Dr. Leonard said, "that even their membership in the body of Christ was defined by their Reverend owner's name." Dr. Leonard told of how Wingate was one of many pastors at that time who used and interpreted the Bible to "grant pastor and congregation divine permission to physically own and spiritually unname their Black sisters and brothers." They believed they were right about the Bible," he proclaimed, "without realizing they were wrong about the gospel." (You better believe he got an amen on that line!)

"That research hit me hard," he said after the room quieted down, his throat choked with emotion. "I've spent decades studying the history of Baptists - Black and white. I taught at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and Wake Forest University, two slavery-born institutions with chapels named for enslavers. The tears always well up when I speak of this," he said, "and I hope they always will... For I wonder what I may be believing

⁶ Dr. Bill Leonard, "Audacity and Humility: the Paradox of Grace,"

<https://youtu.be/8HUyNSE8XH8?si=kVgkssRH7gbL8HnA>

⁷ Committee for Slavery, Race, and Memory, Wake Forest University,

<https://srmp.wfu.edu/to-stand-with-and-for-humanity/defending-the-indefensible-wake-forest-baptists-and-the-bible/>

and acting out right now that someone might stand in this very pulpit in a century and weep, calling me out because I spent 50+ years as an ordained Baptist minister and still didn't grasp the truth when Christ's gospel was right in front of me."⁸

You see, whatever judgment we might layer onto other tenants of the vineyard whose oversight left much to be desired is judgment we must own ourselves. Whatever standard of fruitfulness we hold is a standard of fruitfulness we must practice. Whatever humility we long for is a humility we must insist on for ourselves. "While success comes from strength, stress, and human effort, fruitfulness," Henri Nouwen reminds us, "comes from vulnerability."⁹

So friends, I wonder: what might fruitful lives look like for us as individuals? First Baptist on Fifth, what might fruitful lives look like for our beloved community? What impact, what nourishment, what feast might our fruitful lives offer to the world?

Listen, Jesus says. The city is thriving around us. The need for good news is right in front of us. You, the people, with your Confession of Identity and your beloved community and all your particularities, are ready for the work. What, then, will you do?

VI.

In the spirit of St. Francis, let me close today with a Franciscan Blessing written and offered in this spirit of fruitfulness¹⁰:

⁸ Dr. Bill Leonard, "'Audacity and Humility: the Paradox of Grace,'" <https://youtu.be/8HUyNSE8XH8?si=kVgkssRH7gbL8HnA>

⁹ Nouwen quote

¹⁰ A Franciscan Blessing,

<https://www.paulistcenter.org/a-franciscan-prayer-may-god-bless-you-with-discomfort/>

MAY GOD BLESS YOU with discomfort,
at easy answers, half-truths,
and superficial relationships
so that you may live
deep within your heart.

May God bless you with anger
at injustice, oppression,
and exploitation of people,
so that you may work for
justice, freedom and peace.

May God bless you with tears,
to shed for those who suffer pain,
rejection, hunger, and war,
so that you may reach out your hand
to comfort them and
to turn their pain to joy.

And may God bless you
with enough foolishness
to believe that you can
make a difference in the world,
so that you can do
what others claim cannot be done,
to bring justice and kindness
to all our children and the poor. Amen!