

St. Augustine By-The-Sea Church  
October 8, 2017  
The Rev. Joanne Leslie, Deacon, Diocese of Los Angeles

Readings

*Isaiah 5: 1-7*

*Psalms 80:7-14*

*Philippians 3:4b-14*

*Matthew 21:33-46*

My husband's friend, Phil, belongs to a South LA church called the Rejected Stone Christian Fellowship. I've never been to their services, but I have always loved the name of Phil's church. Who among us hasn't sometimes felt like a rejected stone? What a relief to find a place, as I believe Phil's church is, where people are welcomed, loved and accepted for exactly who they are. Everyone deserves to feel that way.

The name of Phil's church comes from Psalm 118, the psalm Jesus quoted in the reading we heard from the Gospel of Matthew. "Jesus said to them, "Have you never heard 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'?" Jesus quotes this line from Psalm 118 as a challenge to the high priests and leaders who have been questioning his authority to preach in the temple in Jerusalem. Citing Hebrew scripture to these religious leaders might have been enough, but Jesus doesn't want them to miss the point. So he sets up the rejected stone reference with a parable.

The parable we heard this morning is usually known as The Parable of the Wicked Tenants, or sometimes The Parable of the Greedy Tenants. But a word of caution about these titles. Remember, they weren't originally part of the gospels. The titles were added in the 13<sup>th</sup> century when the gospels were first divided into chapters. So this is simply the title a scribe, years later, chose for the parable.

The problem with the titles, as far as I'm concerned, is that they focus on one specific interpretation. If it's called the parable of the wicked tenants or the greedy tenants then we're asked to focus on the bad behavior of the tenants. This can close our minds to what else the parable might be teaching. The genius of parables is that they invite multiple, simultaneous interpretations.

The Jewish New Testament scholar Amy-Jill Levine has written a wonderful book on the gospel parables called *Short Stories by Jesus*. Part of Levine's purpose is to free the parables from the anti-Semitic interpretations that have too often been read into them. Dr. Levine's even larger goal, however, is to challenge our tendency to turn parables into allegories. If it's an allegory it has a single interpretation, one clear message. But not if it's a parable. Levine writes: "Reducing parables to a single meaning destroys their aesthetic as well as ethical potential. This surplus of meaning is how poetry and storytelling work, and it is all to the good."

One more thing, I believe that if our interpretation of a Jesus parable doesn't make us uncomfortable, we're probably closing our ears to something we need to hear. And one way we often close our ears is by focusing exclusively on what the parable might have meant in Jesus' time and not on what it has to say in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Every parable offers us a chance to find ourselves in the story, to identify with several different characters, especially the ones we like least.

Jesus begins this morning's parable with a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a wall around it, dug a wine press, built a watchtower, and then went away. One standard interpretation equates the landowner in this parable with God, but there are disturbing aspects to that. First, the landowner is clearly rich and rich men are not usually the heroes in Jesus' parables. Also, it's an odd theological idea to choose an absentee landlord to represent God. So I ask us to temporarily put aside the assumption that the landowner is God? If we can do that, it opens us up to consider that there may have been fault and greed on all sides in this story.

This is how the parable unfolds. The harvest time came but the landowner is still far away. As a rich man he owned lots of slaves, so he sent his slaves to collect the harvest. Instead of welcoming the slaves, the tenants beat and killed them and refused to turn over the harvest. Another group of slaves was sent and they also suffered and died. Finally, the landowner sent his son but this worked out very badly. The tenants threw the son out and killed him.

There's so much that we don't know, but freed from an allegorical straightjacket, this story raises many questions. Why didn't the landowner stay to supervise his own vineyard and harvest? Did the tenants have a legitimate grievance even if they shouldn't have resorted to violence? Maybe the landowner was exploiting them? Maybe he demanded too large a share of the harvest and the tenants wouldn't have been left with enough to feed their families. After the first slaves were beaten and killed was it responsible for the landlord to send more slaves into danger. Weren't the lives of the slaves worth anything? And finally, perhaps the landowner should have returned to his vineyard himself to see what the problem was rather than sending his son into what was clearly a very dangerous situation?

Opening up the parable this way gives us the opportunity to also ask ourselves some challenging questions. When have we been absentee landowners, wanting other people to do most of the hard work for us and still feeling that we deserve the lion's share of the rewards? When have we been the slaves, sent against our will to speak on someone else's behalf and then suffering the consequences? When have we been the tenants refusing to share the produce that we've come to think of as belonging to us, forgetting that someone else provided the land and the investments? When have we been the son, rejected and maybe even destroyed by those we trusted to welcome us home?

The more I prayed over this parable, the more it felt to me like a story about everyone looking at life through the lens of scarcity. It begins with the landowner who put a fence around his vineyard and built a watchtower. He built a wall to keep in what he saw as rightfully belonging to him and to keep others out. The poor slaves didn't seem to have any rights, except the right to carry unwelcome messages and to suffer the consequences. The tenants didn't trust that there would be enough for them and for the landowner. So they chose to beat and kill the

landowner's slaves, and even to kill the landowner's son rather than share the harvest, as they had presumably agreed to do. What I see is that everyone was worried about not having enough for themselves, no one was willing to be generous.

Jesus was completely capable of incorporating multiple messages into his parables. In a strictly historical sense he probably was using the parable to criticize the chief priests and Pharisees and to remind his followers of the death he was soon to suffer. However, Jesus' teachings were also intended to guide and sustain his followers after he was gone, not simply to explain what was happening at that the moment. So for us, in 21<sup>st</sup> century Los Angeles, maybe this parable offers a warning against trying to keep all the good stuff for ourselves, about the sin of not being generous, of not welcoming those who are sent to us.

As we noted before, Jesus concludes with the quote from the psalms: "The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord's doing and it is amazing in our eyes". We assume Jesus is identifying himself as the rejected cornerstone. That's a reasonable interpretation given that he was just days away his arrest and crucifixion. But just as Jesus selected a piece of Hebrew scripture written hundreds of years earlier to apply to his situation, this gospel reading invites us to identify contemporary examples of rejected stones.

Let me give you just one example, since this is what I was invited to St. A's to talk about this morning. Let's consider immigrants and refugees. Fortunately our state and local governments are making efforts to provide some protections, but the tide of rejection of refugees and immigrants at the national level is speeding up. It's a truism that bears repeating that refugees and immigrants are woven into the fabric of our communities, and no where is this more true than in Southern California. With every deportation we are losing God's cornerstones. We are hurting ourselves as well as others.

The refugee kept out because of a reduced quota might be the software genius who could have written a program to prevent hacking. The Dreamer who is deported before she can finish college and go on to medical school might be the geriatrician who could have figured out how to prevent dementia. The undocumented builder who gets deported might have designed better affordable housing.

And the examples don't have to be this dramatic. I want to tell you briefly about a young man I know from a group called Jovenes. Jovenes was started by Fr. Richard Estrada, formerly a Roman Catholic priest but now an Episcopal priest at the Church of the Epiphany in Lincoln Heights. In the late sixties, Fr. Richard began by allowing underage homeless migrant youth, mostly boys from Central America to sleep in his church at la Placita. This one-man effort grew into the small NGO called Jovenes. Jovenes continues to provide housing, emotional support and job training for homeless immigrant youth. Over the years they have rescued (and I don't think that's too strong a word) thousands of young men and women. Their most recent initiative is that Jovenes has begun working on community and state college campuses to assist the surprising number of students who are homeless while they're in school.

Through Jovenes I recently met David. Like many young men David had some bad luck and made some bad choices in his teens. He ended up on the streets and because of his immigration status was at risk of being deported. Just in the nick of time, David found Jovenes.

He lived in one of their group homes, was connected with a pro bono lawyer to work on his legal status, and learned cooking skills. With his wife Yesenia, David recently started a successful taco business called Tacos El Puma. (Please keep Tacos El Puma in mind the next time you need to cater a party.) My friend David was once a rejected stone. Now David is a cornerstone in our community.

My friends, we all hold dual citizenship. We have a national citizenship and we are citizens of the kingdom of God. We can view immigration issues both through a public policy lens and through a faith lens. There are plenty of powerful political and economic arguments in support of welcoming more refugees and immigrants, as well as creating a path to citizenship for those already here. I'm actually sure many of you can frame these political and economic arguments better than I can.

But here's how I would wrap up the faith argument I've been trying to make this morning. I believe that what the gospel teaches – not just today's parable but the entire gospel – is that there is a profound risk in rejecting people, a profound spiritual risk. The rejected stones that are sent to us are Jesus. We need them, not only for our economic health but also for our spiritual health.

So often rejection of others comes from one of two fears. First we are afraid of scarcity. We fear that there won't be enough food, or housing, or jobs, or health care or something else to meet everyone's needs. So we decide we must deny these to some people, in order to assure having enough for ourselves. Rejection also comes from a fear of discomfort. We don't understand a person's language, or their religion, or their politics. The way they act, or smell or laugh or hug seems weird to us, so we reject them, shut them out of our spaces, essentially to protect ourselves from feeling uncomfortable.

But overcoming these fears will help us grow spiritually.

- Only if we tap into a generosity of time and money and space that goes beyond anything we thought we were capable of;
- Only if we learn to love people we thought we could never even feel comfortable around;
- Only if we really welcome the most unappealing strangers;
- Only then, are we really exercising full citizenship in the kingdom of God.

So I invite you to find ways to get more deeply involved in the struggle for immigrant justice. Do it for the sake of keeping hard working families together. Do it for the sake of giving a young person another chance. Do it for the sake of a Dreamer who is carrying the hopes of their whole family. Do it so our communities will flourish. But most of all do it for yourself, so you can produce the fruits of God's kingdom.