

“Clear Cut”

Sermon by Dr. Leah Fowler

Presbyterian Church in Leonia

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Exodus 20:1-3, 7-9, 12-20; Matthew 21:33-46

I want to begin my sermon with a story. It is a parable, but it is not the parable we just heard in the gospel.

Once upon a time, there was a village that sat alongside a river. While one woman was fishing in the river, she noticed a baby floating down the river. She threw her fishing pole onto the shore and dove into the river to rescue that baby. The village took that baby in, made sure the baby got warmed and fed and comforted. The next day, a village man found two babies floating down the river. They were rescued in a similar way. Each day, even more babies were floating down the river than the last. So the village formed groups: one group that rescued the babies from the water, one group to cook food for the babies, one group to comfort the babies, until everyone in the village was involved in the care of those babies.

However, one day it occurred to a villager to ask the elders an important question: why don't we go upstream, and find out who is throwing these babies into the water?!

Something about this morning's parable Jesus tells in Matthew about the wicked tenants reminds me of the river parable of the babies. I understand that traditional interpretation of Jesus' parable puts the landlord as God; the first group of slaves the landlord sends as the covenant or law; the second group of slaves as the prophets; and the landlord's son of course is Jesus. The tenants are the scribes and Pharisees, religious rulers that have abused their power.

But before we decode the parable and assign representations to the human beings in the story, I want to first look at the characters in the story as people and not the objects they represent. When I do so, this story gets frustrating and even terrible. It is one thing to see a landowner send slaves, or servants, to collect rent and check on his land. However, when these slaves get beaten and even killed by tenants who have grown violent, it does not seem right that the landowner would just send another batch of slaves to collect the rent. The same thing happens to these slaves; but this time they are beaten even worse, and we can assume at least one was killed as well. And so the landowner sends his own son to collect the rents, saying to himself, “they will respect my son.”

Foolish, foolish man.

This landowner needed to hear a wise saying from Maya Angelou: “When someone shows you who they are, believe them the first time.”

Of course, the landlord’s son gets killed. And the landlord’s continuing supply of supposedly innocent people to collect his rent reminds me of the village industry that emerged over the task of saving babies from drowning in the river. **Surely a more creative solution could be imagined than to perpetuate a system that exists for the purpose of enabling a problem.**

I have to wonder why in the parable did the landowner not come up with a different tactic when his first efforts to collect his rents through the slaves did not work. Instead he continues to allow the people who are close to him-- first his workers, and then his son-- get beaten, robbed, and killed by people who have already shown themselves to be violent. We can also assume that the people he sent did not have choice in the matter, as slaves by definition are forced to do what their master asks of them. I would hope that if I were the landowner, I would have considered other options

available, such as turning to the community to insist on justice, or asking for a mediated dialogue to find out why the tenants refused to pay rent. Did they feel they were being exploited for any reason? As we celebrate Columbus Day tomorrow, we acknowledge the history of European settlers coming in to claim and own land that had already been inhabited by native peoples, all over the world. Could this have been a situation such as that? No matter what the circumstances, I would not keep sacrificing human life to known killers for a matter of money, and there is *no* price I would pay to sacrifice my child's life for a *cash* payback. That for me is clear-cut.

There are some things that should be clear-cut for a Christian. Jesus summarized the Ten Commandments into two main themes: loving God, and loving neighbor. **On these two hang all the law and the prophets, Jesus said.**

Sometimes, however, it is important to expand what is in those file folders again and see what is written there. **Under the commandments about loving God are these:**

- You shall have one God, and no gods before God.
- You should not make an idol or graven image of God.
- You should not use God's name in ways that cheapen its meaning and power.
- You should honor the Sabbath day and keep it holy-- *I would say this rule is not just for God, but it is also for us. If God needed rest, God knows we need it too!*

Under loving neighbor:

- Honor your parents.
- **Do not kill.**
- Do not cheat on the covenants you make with your loved ones.
- Do not steal.
- Be honest.
- Don't obsess over wanting stuff that is not yours.

We could look at the ten commandments as an ethical treaty that governs relationship between God and God's people, and the people with each other. But it goes deeper than that. The Hebrew word to make a covenant, *berit*, literally means *to cut*. This covenant was not only cut into stone tablets; the covenant was also cut into their bodies, as told by the covenant God made with Abraham that all males be circumcised. And so, in a moment of ethical uncertainty, a man of the covenant need only look down to be reminded of who he is and what he stands for. It is clear-cut, so to speak. Women were exempt from this sign of circumcision, though as Jewish feminist Judith Plaskow points out, "women have always known or assumed our presence at Sinai"¹ where the covenant was made.

After this past week, I want to open and examine the commandment "You shall not murder." I suspect all of us in this room can feel a clean conscience on that commandment. *Phew, check that one off the list of being right with God!*

However, looking back at that parable of the babies in the river, could it be possible that we have supported an industry that allows deadly violence to not only survive but also to thrive?

Do you know that the Centers for Disease Control, which keeps statistics on all epidemics threatening human life and is the go-to authority on public health policy, is barred by US law from doing any research on how gun violence hurts life expectancy in America? Did you know that abused women are 5 times more likely to be killed if their abuser owns a gun and that more than half of all mass shooters in this country have a record that includes domestic abuse? ² Did you know that lenient laws in many states

¹ Judith Plaskow, *Standing Again at Sinai: Judaism from a Feminist Perspective*, HarperCollins Publishing, 1990, p. 27

² <http://smartgunlaws.org/gun-laws/policy-areas/who-can-have-a-gun/domestic-violence-firearms/>

do not even require a background check so that people with serious mental disorders or violent records can have quick and easy access to firearms?

Politicians who vote with the gun lobby, and those of us who put them in office, have blood on their hands; and because they spend our tax money, we have blood on our hands too.

It is not as if we haven't had messengers to show us what a culture of violence, and the ready access of guns can do. But for some reason,

-The shooting of 20 six and seven year olds at an elementary school in Sandy Hook, CT, was not a message that would change the gun lobby.

-The killing of the killing of 9 church people studying the bible at the historically black Mother Emmanuel AME in Charleston was not enough to change the gun lobby.

-The killing of 49 LGBT people at the Pulse nightclub in Orlando was not enough to change the gun lobby

-The shooting of Republican congressmen plus the officers charged to protect them at a Congressional Baseball practice was not enough to change the gun lobby.

-Will the killing of 58 people, plus the injury of more than 500 others, last week in Las Vegas, cause us to go up the river and demand change to gun policy in America?

These are only a small number of the mass shootings that have happened recently in America, and far more vast are the number of household gun deaths from murder, suicide, and accidents.

I am sick and tired of responding in worship to gun violence that happens in this country. Worship should be our chance to give our praises to God and to nurture discipleship of Jesus. But when lives are lost, it is our Christian duty to both pray, and to act.

In the parable of the vineyard, when the collecting of rent becomes more important than the lives sent to collect it, there is a problem. When the right to bear arms in this country becomes more sacred than life itself, what we have is idolatry-- another violation of the Ten Commandments.

As for today, I am going to resist the temptation to preach this sermon placing God in the role of a landowner who is absent and places the collecting of money over the value of human life. After all, earlier in this chapter of Matthew, we see Jesus in the Temple, turning over the tables of the money changers who are using God's sanctuary as a place to profit out of people's desire to seek and get right with God. Jesus made a political statement against the idolatry of money getting in the way of the worship of God. I suspect that placing God in the landowner's position does not fit Jesus' intention for this story but I will also admit that suspicion comes as much from my own discomfort in casting God in such a role as it does from my research and scholarship on the author's intention. It just doesn't taste right to me.

Taste and see that the Lord is *good*. These words of the psalmist opened our reading of scripture today. The fruits of God's vineyard must be full and ripe with goodness. When something in scripture does not taste right to me, I just turn back to Jesus for guidance. We can understand the law and the prophets by loving God, and loving neighbor. These are the fruits of goodness God wants to help us cultivate in God's vineyard. May God help us to taste and see better. Amen.