



CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

In the name of the loving, liberating, and life-giving God, Amen.

I think I've mentioned in the past that Jesus's parables can sometimes feel as if they are a setup for a twist ending that kind of catches us by surprise and really gets us thinking. But other times, they are left open ended, ending on a kind of cliffhanger, where we, the audience, are left to complete the story. That is the case today when we have this landowner who builds a vineyard and then rents it out to some farmers who will tend the crops and in exchange share the profits with the owner. Apparently, a common agreement in those days, the point being they are not the owners. They are to care for the vineyard. They are to be its stewards and then share its fruits.

Does that sound familiar at all with stewardship season on the horizon? But we soon learn that these farmers have very different ideas in mind. When the harvest time comes, the landowner sends his servants to collect his share. And these farmers want to have it all to themselves and so they beat and kill them. And here we have our first tip that something about this story isn't as we might expect. Because instead of calling the authorities to have these tenants arrested, or sending in some hired goons to run these guys off, what does the owner do? He sends more servants, more messengers. He keeps trying. Rather than retaliate, this landowner keeps reaching out in peace. Hoping to restore the agreement, hoping to restore their arrangement, hoping to restore their relationship.

And when they refuse and continue to kill his messengers in the fullness of time, he sends his only son in the hope that maybe he can get their attention, hoping that maybe he can turn them around from their wicked ways. And again, notice he sends the son in peace, not with armed guards. He comes alone and with open arms. But in their greed and selfishness, they kill him as well. At which point Jesus ends the story and reminds his listeners that one day the landowner is going to come back. And when he does, what do you think he's going to do?

And there's our cliffhanger. How do we think this story should end? Without missing a beat, the crowd says, put them to death, hello? In fact, don't just kill them, make them suffer and then kill them. Tit for tat, right? Eye for an eye? They respond with what we call retributive justice, which is by far the default way we think of justice, even today. Retributive justice is retribution. It says that injustice or a crime requires punishment. Something that fits the crime. If you lie, we don't trust you again. If you steal, you go to jail. If you take a life, well, you lose yours.

Whether it's life in prison or lethal injection, depending on which state you live in. Our entire criminal justice system is arguably built on this premise. When our political leaders get on TV after a heinous crime and promise to make them pay, or we are going to bring them to justice, they are echoing the crowd's response to Jesus today, some 2,000 years later.

In fact, it's so much our default way of thinking that we even apply it to God sometimes. Do we not? Anyone here ever been raised to think that God rewards good people with Heaven and punishes bad people with Hell? Has anyone ever heard a preacher say that in order for God to forgive humanity, Jesus first had to suffer and die in order to pay the price for our sin. That's the God of retribution. And in my opinion, it is one of the great tragedies of the Christian faith. That so many of us have been raised to think of God in that way. Because God is the God of unconditional love, endless forgiveness, unearned mercy and love and grace. Retribution and violence, that can't be God because that's how we do things. That's business as usual for us.

Jesus does warn us about punishment, but it's about the prisons of our own making, the ones we lock ourselves into when we live only for ourselves. Selfish people, they experience a selfish world, do they not? Hurtful people generate more hurt. Hateful people, more hate. It's what they know. It's what they trade in. It's the currency of their lives. That's what Jesus is saying at the end of this gospel when He warns us that rejecting the cornerstone, rejecting the way of love, crushes anyone under its weight. We reap what we sow.

But as the saying goes, we become the God we worship. So if we believe in a God that punishes, if we believe in a God that turns his back on those who don't like Him, well I guess we can too. And so retribution is the default mode. And it shows up everywhere, does it not? In our foreign policy, at the workplace, in the supermarket, in the Holy Land. When someone disinvites us, do we not leave them out of our next party? That's retribution. When somebody cuts us off in traffic, do we not take pleasure in passing them up at the next light? I know I do. I'm out there getting some justice on Woodward Boulevard every day, trust me. When your child comes home complaining about the school bully, are we on the phone with the principal demanding they get kicked out? When someone says something hurtful, or we don't like their politics, do we write them off?

I think if we're honest, one of the reasons retribution persists is it is so much easier. Retribution really doesn't demand much from us. We don't need to open our minds. We don't need to really listen. We don't need to consider the opinions or the experience of others. It's totally one sided. It doesn't need their involvement at all. I can write people off all on my own, from the comfort of my kitchen table. And what's more, it can make you feel powerful. Doesn't it? It makes you feel like you're in control, and it feeds our ego. And for a time, it can

even seem like it works. Because throwing people away, and throwing away the key, and driving divisions between us and separating us into different camps, it can create some peace, but it's a false peace because it doesn't change anyone. It doesn't challenge us, it just breeds resentment, hardens opinions, and sows the seeds for future endless conflict.

In other words, retribution is everywhere. It's what the world practices, it's what the world rewards and endorses, and that should be our tip off that it is not the way of God. So what is the way of God? We hosted a leadership conference right here last week for clergy and we were introduced there to another form of justice, something called restorative justice. It's a type of justice that seeks to heal the harm from a crime. It seeks to bring together the victim and the offender in an effort to restore the broken relationship. Its goal isn't to punish. Its goal is nothing short of shalom, the peace that passes all understanding. Wholeness, peace, true peace.

So with that in mind, if the owner in the parable is indeed God, then we already kind of know how the story ends, do we not? God doesn't rain fire and brimstone upon us tenants. This is a God who never gives up on us, no matter what we've done, no matter what we've left undone. Even when his own friends and closest followers abandon and betray him, God stretches his arms upon the Cross and extends his hands in the never ending hope of reconciliation with all of us. By raising His Son from the dead to show the world and all of history that the response to violence isn't more violence, it's more life. It's more forgiveness. It's more mercy. It's more understanding. That is our way out. That's always been our way out. And it's the only way that we can change our hearts or ever hope to change someone else's. Unrelenting, unwavering, unconditional, unending love and forgiveness that paves the way for restoration. That's the ending that God is writing for this parable. And it's one that has the possibility of changing everything.

Back in my fraternity days in college, we had this neighbor who was constantly complaining about the noise coming from our house. Go figure. But actually, you know, we weren't all that bad. We were pretty good with our neighbors. We got along with all of them. We were very courteous. We gave them a special number to call if there was ever a problem. But nothing we could do could satisfy this guy. He would call the cops if we were watching a football game and cheering too loudly. He would call the cops if we were out on the driveway laughing and telling stories. He would call the cops if we were in the backyard playing catch. And so we put up signs making fun of him. We put up these stupid scarecrows. I won't go into it. Not our best moment. And that just triggered him to complain to the city and you get the idea.

It became this perfect cycle of retaliation and retribution until finally, someone decided to write a new ending to the story. I don't remember who it was, but someone thought to bring in a neighborhood mediator to see if we could work something out. And so to our surprise, the neighbor actually agreed. And he came over, and we met him. And I was surprised how young he was, maybe in his 30s, maybe early 40s. And the mediator had us all go around in a circle and introduce ourselves. And when it came around to him, he said his name was Bob. And then that's all he could get out before he started to cry and just sob right in front of us. And when he spoke up again, he said, I'm a brother. And we thought, okay, a brother? He says, no, no, no. I'm a Theta Chi. I'm one of your brothers. Back when I was in college.

And he went on to explain how he had become an alcoholic. And how it had ruined his life and he had only recently started to get things together and get into recovery. And so when he heard our parties, when he heard us carrying on, when he heard us laughing and watching football games, he wanted nothing more than to come join us. But he knew he couldn't so he called the cops. And there was this awe that came over the room. This stranger suddenly really became like a brother. We had this incredible sense of empathy all of a sudden. And some sadness. How did we ever let it get this far?

Well, needless to say, that meeting changed everything. We went on to build a friendship. He came over for dinner. He got involved with the alumni. He helped out at some of our community service projects. And we started to rent him a hotel room on the nights we had a big party. But you see, we went from retaliation and retribution to restoration, to reconciliation.

What are the new endings waiting to be written in your life? Might it be time to sit down with that person who wrote us off? Maybe it's time to risk telling them some of our story, sharing with them some of our feelings. When someone cuts me off in traffic, maybe it's time for me to start praying for them. Praying that whatever anxiety and fear is driving them might be healed. Rather than kick out the school bully, what if we were to invite him over for a play date? Get to know him. Find out what's going on in his life. Discover the hurt that he has been sharing with others.

Jesus is inviting us all to finish the stories of our life with a new ending. One that we have to write together. One that begins by turning the other cheek and ends with the possibility of changing everything. How will your story end?

Amen.