

Proper 22 A 2017

Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20

Psalm 19

Philippians 3:4b-14

Matthew 21:33-46

What can we say?

Today's parable is really difficult.

Sometimes, when the first followers of Jesus

Heard his parables,

They insisted they understood,

When clearly they didn't.

Other times,

They protested,

This saying is difficult.

Who can believe it?

Like them, we may protest.

Where can we go with today's parable?

Is there any good news in this story?

Here, maybe, is a new setting

In which to imagine the parable

We heard just now,

A new way, maybe

To live into the challenge of this parable.

Picture this:

Last Tuesday,

The Brown Palace,

A ladies' luncheon

In a private dining room

On the second floor.

Lovely flowers.

Lovely food.

Lively conversation about things that matter.

And the woman next to me,

Whom I have known for a long time,

But not well,

Turns to me and says,

So –

You have to preach on Sunday.

Yes, I replied.
And waited.
For the question,
Or the statement,
Or the feeling.

“What can you possibly say?”
That was the question.

Several of answers that rolled through my head
Would startle some of you,
Because they include words you have never heard me say.
Words a few of you might like to imagine
I don't even know.

But I respect this woman,
And I like her,
And actually,
Her question was one
I had begun to ask myself.

So I said something real about my doubts,
And I listened,
And we found no answers,
But shared a wonderment and a sorrow
That might have been as good as an answer,
At least in that moment.

But the question remains.

What can any of us say,
When we confront the times?
Another massacre.
The vague, but real,
Threat of nuclear war.
Fire and flood and driving wind
Tearing apart the lives
Of hundreds of thousands.

Or our own vestry's extremely difficult discernment
That we need to pause in offering shelter
And sanctuary to our unsheltered neighbors,
The men and women of this city
Who have no place to lay their heads,

No place in which to exercise their basic right to rest.

What can we possibly say to those women and men
Who have sojourned among us,
Taking shelter on our grounds,
Rising before dawn
To go find work
Or simply a place to be,
Returning after dark
To lie down, hoping for peace and safety?

What can we possibly say
To our neighbors who live in houses,
Who fear for their safety
Or the health of their neighborhood
Or their sense of wellbeing
In a livable city?

What can we possibly say
To a world in which every single person
Is anxious, or afraid, or angry?

The world is asking us,
At ladies' luncheons
And meetings with angry neighbors
And in checkout lines
And –
Lord have mercy –
At concert venues:
What can you possibly say?
What can you say that will make a difference?

The world is asking:
What do we have to offer?
What do we have to offer that matters?

Does it matter that there are still Christians in the world?
What do we gain from worship,
Prayer, community?
Is there any value in scripture?

Who needs a facile interpretation of today's parable?
A regimented understanding of the Ten Commandments?
An escapist view of the epistle?

There is a parlor game to be played here,

Where we think up the least helpful ways
Of packaging the gift of holy scripture
As we receive it –
Or don't –
In today's lessons.

Ways of reading the gospel parable
That exclude the many and reward the few.

Ways of reading the ten commandments
That turn us into fearful rule followers.

Ways of reading Paul's message to the early church
That urge us to detach from the grit and trauma of the world
And steal away.

Like making up naughty limericks,
Reaching for dreadful ways of understanding scripture
Can be kind of fun –
And can help bolster our sense of superiority –
Our assurance that we are more open,
More inclusive,
More sophisticated
Than those who read scripture
And force it to say what they mean.
(We would never do that.)

We can play games with scripture,
Or take it lightly.
But the times invite – demand –
Something more.

What can we offer
That addresses the pain,
The fear,
The limitations of our condition?

What can we offer as Christians,
As Anglicans,
What can our own community offer –
We who prize openness,
Inclusivity,
Beauty,
Mystery,
Questions.

What can we offer?

We can't fix it,
Or make it go away.
But we do have something to offer.

We can model an open stance
Towards the pain and glory of the world.
Working with what we're given.
Facing the questions with courage.
Looking for meaning.

So – Let's be that way right now.
If we are a people of faith,
And we have to answer the question,
What can you possibly say,
Let's face the question with courage,
And work with what we're given.

Let's pick up the gift we have been given today,
A really difficult parable.
Let's pick it up,
Shake it, smell it,
Roll it over and over,
And remove the paper.

You can tear the paper off
Or remove it carefully with a letter opener.
The gift will still be waiting inside.

A parable is a gift.
We know it's precious,
And sometimes it takes a while
To understand how much it means to us.
Sometimes it's a big surprise.
Sometimes it's hard to love.

This parable is not easy to love.
It feels wrong.
It has been mangled and coopted over and over
By those who need to create in groups
And out groups
So they – we – feel safe and good and loved.

I don't know if any of us are free of those needs –
Or if we ever will be.

But I do know this –
There is enough for everyone.
All of us are good enough.
We can all be safe and loved.
We don't need to keep others out
In order to feel like we're in.

And I do know this.
Any time I am tempted
To follow a madding crowd
Into an understanding that a parable is about us and them,
I try to hear the still small voice
Reminding me,
It might be all about you.

The whole parable may be taking place
Inside you.

You might walk into the parable
And see yourself everywhere.

Whatever journey this parable has been on,
To get to its present state,
And whatever I may have thought about it in times past,
I'm going to take a gamble,
And I invite you to take it with me.
Let's believe, for now,
That Jesus really told this parable,
Or something very like this.
That means, I hope and believe,
That this story is a way of being at one
With the one who was one with the Holy One.

And in these times,
Searching for what we might possibly say,
Working with what we have been given,
Let's believe there is a gift in here.
We just have to find it.

One way in
Is to let go of us and them,
Who's in and who's out,
And think instead
About this gospel speaking to the whole of who we are.

The ins and outs of each of us.

And then we might begin to wonder
About how this gospel might set us free.

Free to be compassionate,
Courageous,
Committed.

Let's enter the parable and ask questions like this:

What if I am the vineyard,
And the landowner,
And the tenants,
And the messengers?

What, in my life right now,
limits my freedom,
My willingness and capacity
To be compassionate,
To seek forgiveness,
To commit to reconciliation,
To believe in hope?

What messengers of hope
Do I destroy
When they dare to enter my vineyard?

How am I stuck in old ways?

What do I guard, that I could share?

Is there a new and renewed,
Free and fearless child of God
Who could inherit the vineyard?

This way of seeing, I hope,
Doesn't mean the gospel is offered to us
To increase our own happiness and fulfillment.

The gospel is offered to renew the world.
The invitation to us is to be part of that renewal.

But we start with the vineyard
That sets us free
Because it's only when we are free
That we can join the dream of God
For the healing and wellbeing of the world.

What can we possibly say?
What can we possibly do?

What can we offer that is authentic,
That addresses the pain, and fear,
and limitations of the world?

If we have roused out the old tenants of our vineyards,
Fear, anxiety, anger,
And given ourselves over
To love, to courage, to compassion,
Then we have something to offer the world
In a time of great need.

What can we possibly say?

Only this –
The kingdom of heaven is among us,
Right here, right now.
Even here, even now.

It is everywhere
Where we let ourselves love,
Summon our courage,
And open ourselves up to compassion.

This is something we can say,
Something we can offer.
Love casts out fear.
Freedom makes a way forward.
Compassion conquers anger.
This is good news.

Will it work?
Will we be successful?

That's not ours to answer or control.
We only bring ourselves,
And trust in the mercy of God
To bless what we bring.