

Sermon for Pentecost 20 (22A)  
Christ Church, Andover  
The Rev. Jeffrey Gill  
October 2, 2005

Readings: Isaiah 5:1-7; Psalm 80:7-14; Philippians 3:14-21; Matthew 21:33-43

For the third week in a row now we have heard from Matthew's gospel, parables about vineyards and those who work in them and own them. This one today is about the wicked tenants of a vineyard who eventually kill the owner's son. It's a parable about revenge.

Revenge. A terrible sounding thing. But an emotion that we have all no doubt felt at one time or another, if only in the most innocent ways.

A family's teenage son had just received his brand new driver's license. To celebrate the event, the whole family trooped out to the driveway and climbed into the car for his inaugural drive. The dad immediately headed to the back seat, directly behind the newly minted driver.

The son looked in the rearview mirror, pleased with himself, and said to his dad: "I'll bet you're back there to get a change of scenery after all those months of sitting in the front passenger seat teaching me how to drive."

"Nope," the dad said. "I'm gonna sit back here and kick the back of your seat while you drive, just like you have been doing to me for sixteen years."

Ah, sweet revenge!

Today we get the third in a series of Jesus' little life stories set not in the family car, but where his audience spent a lot of their time, in vineyards. Jesus is talking, as he often does, with the chief priests and the elders. They have a lot in common. They talk about important matters of the day. They are all interested in how life could change for the better, because, frankly, it's pretty miserable for most people. They are a people under occupation. They are ruled by foreigners who had come in, taken over their land, oppressed them with exorbitant taxes, and ruled them with laws that didn't fit with their history and culture, or with their religion. Their discontent had a lot to do, too, with economics, as political unrest usually does. Most of the land, especially in Galilee where much of Jesus' ministry took place, was owned by foreigners who didn't invest in the land, but took their profits elsewhere. It was rich, fertile land – a valuable resource to an occupying power. Much of the food grown was exported, leaving a shortage for those who worked the land. Most of the local people had become indentured servants when they could no longer afford their own land. As tenant farmers they worked long hours through long seasons, and then their absentee owners would collect the profits and take them away, out of the country. Capital flight. Meanwhile most of the tenants had barely enough to feed their families.

So when Jesus begins telling a parable about an owner who comes looking for his profits, the people who hear this parable hear it very differently than we do today. They have no sympathy, either for the owner or for his representatives who are killed. "Serves them right," was the implicit sentiment in their nodding heads. And when the owner sent his son, that was even better, because if there was no heir, maybe the tenants would be able to reclaim the land as their own. These were people who were interested, after all, in achieving some kind of basic justice for themselves.

But Jesus then asked them what they thought would happen when the *owner* himself came, and they said, with a certain amount of anger and resignation, “He’ll put the wretches to a miserable death, and lease the land to others who will agree to give him everything at harvest time.” That’s what they had come to expect from their merciless occupiers. It was the reply of those who had resigned themselves to a cruel fate, and had nearly lost hope.

Life’s circumstances had made the cycle of retribution and revenge seem as natural as the air they breathed. Someone does you wrong, you get them back. It’s just kind of the way life goes on, until people are, as it were, programmed for revenge.

What is it about revenge that appeals to us? It’s an emotion that acts upon us almost as a biological imperative. It’s about survival at some level, and the desire to create disincentives for others to hurt us. But it’s a moral and spiritual issue too.

We expect that revenge, or “getting back at someone,” as we’d probably prefer to call it, will somehow help balance out the scales of justice; or right a past wrong; or compensate for some loss or grievance that we have against someone

In fact, revenge, or retribution, does imply a certain kind of justice. If you think about it, revenge is morally preferable to baseless, random and wanton violence. At least, you could argue, revenge has a cause and a certain kind of rationality to it, even if it is often governed more by the emotions than by reason. Revenge and retribution even imply some degree of proportionality in fitting punishments to crimes.

But revenge, even if it has a kind of symmetry and balance to it, is clearly an imperfect solution to the human problem of righting wrongs. Revenge very often *escalates* the hurt or violence in a situation. It always, by definition, perpetuates wrongs done. And even if the one who carries out an act of revenge feels vindicated, feels her emotions restored somehow through an act of revenge, there is something that has been damaged in the spirit when we take joy in another’s suffering, no matter how well deserved it might have been.

It’s hard for oppressed people not to think about revenge. Not to want it. Not to feel justified in exacting it. Not to feel a sense of justice in bringing it about.

Some of the world’s most deep seated and seemingly intractable conflicts are exacerbated by unending cycles of revenge. It is obvious to all reasonable people that revenge never leads us in a positive direction. At its best, some kind of status quo justice is achieved. But more often, it leads to a downward spiral in human behavior that can seem nearly impossible to bring to an end, because one act of revenge begets another (and one more cruel), until the result is the brutalization of peoples and the degradation of society in general.

But Jesus points to another way. The priests and elders, when Jesus was talking about vineyards and landlords, presumed he was talking about the absentee landlords and the social injustices they were all too familiar with. It must have come as a shock, then, to realize that in this parable was an allegory equating the landlord or owner not with the Roman occupation, but with God, and them, the leaders in the community, with the tenants who had been left in charge. Jesus’ brief quote from the 118<sup>th</sup> Psalm, about the stone that the builders rejected, changed the terms of the allegory, because it was one they would have all recognized as a psalm that celebrated God’s purposes.

The eyes of the priests and elders were opened, and they realized that they had just been trapped, or so it seemed. When Jesus had asked them what the owner would do when he came, *they* had said he would come and kill everyone and find someone else to take their place. Was Jesus telling them that God was going to exact revenge upon them and kill them all for having failed to pay attention to the prophets? Was *that* what he was saying?

It wasn't. There is no revenge or retribution. No one will be killed. It doesn't mean there won't be consequences, but it won't be the way of revenge.

What, then, *does* he say?

First of all, he doesn't let them off the hook. It's clear that he's telling them that as leaders they have failed the people. That's the point of his telling the story. They did not heed the prophets. They killed them instead, and not only that, but they didn't give heed even to God's own son.

But what he does say is that the kingdom of God will be taken from them and given to those who produce the fruits of the kingdom. The reign of God, for which they all longed, would involve positive movement in the human family – not just the negative energy of revenge. It would involve people bearing the fruit of God's reign in their lives.

When Jesus spoke about the kingdom of God, as he often did, he was not talking about it as some abstract theological doctrine, but as one writer has said, "as the presupposition for ethics" – for what we do and how we behave. It's about how our lives reflect the values and qualities of the perfect reign of God.

"And so, dear chief priests and elders," he seems to say, "let's see the goods." Let's see some evidence of God's reign in the quality of human relationships, in how you treat one another, and in the way the human family begins to live together. "Those who bear the fruit will be given the kingdom of God." God is not interested in exacting revenge upon you, but God does want to see some signs that you're paying attention.

I'm imagining the dad in our little story about the car getting out of the back seat and saying to his son, "you know, I'm not really going to sit back there and do that. I'd like you to think about this next time *you* sit back there and are about to kick the back of the seat, but I'd much rather sit up here beside you and for us to be adults together."

God's desire for us is that we grow up – to be "mature," as St. Paul puts it, to move beyond those elemental desires to get even that are so much a part of our nature, and instead to claim a higher form of justice, to claim what St. Paul refers to in the epistle to the Philippians as "our citizenship in heaven."

It is, finally, the only way forward, and the only true hope we have.