

08.10.2017
By Kyle Vandenbroucke – Corrymeela Volunteer

Introduction

In Matthew 18 Peter asks Jesus how many times one should forgive someone. He suggests seven times, thinking he's going to impress Jesus. Jesus responds with a seemingly impossible answer "seventy times seven." In our life, have there been moments with conflicts with others that we have come to believe that the other cannot change? Are there moments when we have taken advantage of another's trust in us?

Some questions to think about as you read this text are:

- Choose one character and think about what your reaction would be in their given situation.
- Why is there a conflict between the landlord and the tenants? What do they both want that is causing a division between them?
- Who is taking ownership of the vineyard, and how does that relate to the other stories of vineyards we see in Matthew?
- Can the beatitudes reveal a deeper meaning in this text?
- How does this passage relate to Jesus' words, "Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye, but do not notice the log in your own?" (Matt. 7:3)
- Does Paul's words in Romans shed light on this passage? "Don't you know that God's mercy is meant to lead you to repentance?" (Rom. 2:4)

Text

Matthew 21:33–46 21:33

"Listen to another parable. There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a wine press in it, and built a watchtower. Then he leased it to tenants and went to another country.

When the harvest time had come, he sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his produce.

But the tenants seized his slaves and beat one, killed another, and stoned another.

Again he sent other slaves, more than the first; and they treated them in the same way.

Finally he sent his son to them, saying, "They will respect my son."

But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, "This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance."

So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him.

Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?"

They said to him, "He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the harvest time."

Jesus said to them, "Have you never read in 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'?"

Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom.

The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls."

When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they realized that he was speaking about them.

They wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowds, because they regarded him as a prophet.

Comment

Some might say that in this parable the landowner trusts the tenants to a fault. He gives them chance after chance to change their minds even when they have clearly shown that they are not to be trusted. The benefit of the doubt is given to them in hopes that they may change. Because the landowner does this, he is showing us that he believes that they can change. The landowner is actually so convinced that they could change their actions and become trustworthy, that he sacrifices much. He gives up his very own son, in the hopes that there may be a change in the hearts of

the tenants.

The previous parable was about repenting and a change of mind, but Jesus does not talk about the consequences of the disobedience. This parable goes further to say that there have been many generous chances for a change of mind in the hearts of the tenants, but now there will be a consequence for their stubbornness. In this society we have a tendency to say that we shouldn't be a 'doormat'. We shouldn't let others run over us. How does this story shed light on this idea? In the end Jesus says of those who are unconvinced by this merciful and generous act, 'the kingdom will be taken away from you and given to someone who will produce.' So there comes an end to it where trust is retracted and the kingdom will be taken from those it was entrusted to.

How can this shed light on trust in others, and how Jesus thinks of forgiveness? There is clearly a lot of mercy on the part of the landowner, but what does Jesus think of how far this forgiveness goes with his audience (the chief priest and elders)? In our own life, where are the lines that we draw with giving the benefit of the doubt? And how do we respond when that trust is broken initially? Is the immediate reaction to send judgment on the other, or is the posture one that allows room for the other to change? If we hold others to be unchangeable, then how can we believe that we ourselves can change as well? Three times the landowner sends his servants, and eventually his son, in order to collect his produce. Whose land was it? The tenants treat it as if it were theirs. We can imagine reasons for why they are doing this. Maybe the produce has been stolen, and the tenants are afraid. But the landowner has put so much care into this plot of land that there are protections in place, such as the fence and watchtower that make this seem unlikely. Perhaps they have not tended the land properly and it has not produced what it should have, and they have nothing to give the landowner. Perhaps they are greedy and desire not only the harvest for themselves, but the inheritance of the son as well.

What is Jesus telling the religious leaders about ownership of the kingdom of God in this story? It is interesting that Jesus doesn't come to an end with the story. He never tells us what the landowner actually does. What he does tell us is that the kingdom will be taken away from some, and given to an unassuming others. The tenants did not surrender the fruit to the landowner. they assumed it was theirs to do with whatever they wanted. They chose to take control, rather than release control. For us too there might be areas in our lives where God has given us a responsibility to steward, but we have chosen to take possession as if they were our own; areas where we have not released the fruits of the Kingdom but kept them for ourselves.

Response

Where in our own lives might we be acting like the tenants in the parable: Finances? Relationships? Time? Take some time now to think further about this question and consider how you can be a better tenant and steward of the gifts given to you.

Prayer

God, your mercy extends over us in ways unimaginable. Even on the cross, Jesus, you ask God to forgive those who are doing a heinous and evil act to you. Your forgiveness is what draws us to change in our lives. So, move us now into a new understanding of what it means to bear fruit in your kingdom. Transform our hearts, so that we might seek first that kingdom. We desire to be generous with others as you have been generous to us. We thank you now that you are Emmanuel, God with us, and that you will aid us in this journey.

In Jesus name, Amen.

Season: Ordinary time

Themes: Forgiveness