

He went on to tell the people this parable: “A man planted a vineyard, rented it to some farmers and went away for a long time. ¹⁰ At harvest time he sent a servant to the tenants so they would give him some of the fruit of the vineyard. But the tenants beat him and sent him away empty-handed. ¹¹ He sent another servant, but that one also they beat and treated shamefully and sent away empty-handed. ¹² He sent still a third, and they wounded him and threw him out.

¹³ “Then the owner of the vineyard said, ‘What shall I do? I will send my son, whom I love; perhaps they will respect him.’

¹⁴ “But when the tenants saw him, they talked the matter over. ‘This is the heir,’ they said. ‘Let’s kill him, and the inheritance will be ours.’ ¹⁵ So they threw him out of the vineyard and killed him.

“What then will the owner of the vineyard do to them? ¹⁶ He will come and kill those tenants and give the vineyard to others.”

When the people heard this, they said, “May this never be!”

¹⁷ Jesus looked directly at them and asked, “Then what is the meaning of that which is written:

*“ ‘The stone the builders rejected
has become the capstone’?”*

¹⁸ Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces, but he on whom it falls will be crushed.”

¹⁹ The teachers of the law and the chief priests looked for a way to arrest him immediately, because they knew he had spoken this parable against them. But they were afraid of the people. (Luke 20:9-19)

God’s Love Twists the Plot

Do you like a good plot twist? Most of us do. You’ve probably had the experience of watching a movie and realizing what was going to happen before the end. How did you feel when the end came? It’s nice to be right, but isn’t it a lot more fun when they surprise you? Don’t you remember and talk about a movie when you never saw what was coming? The gospels are not a work of fiction and God did not write them to entertain us. But the gospels do contain the biggest plot twists possible because God’s love overcomes human sin. This morning, we’re again considering a parable Jesus told. Parables were teaching tools. Quite often, Jesus included twists in those stories, both to hold the interest of the people listening and to make his point in a dramatic and memorable way. Sometimes, that’s lost on us today, because we’ve grown up hearing these parables. But the parable Jesus told today horrified his audience. It was full of plot twists. But there’s something funny here when you really look at it. The plot twists come from God’s love. The results of the law in the parable are absolutely predictable. But all through the parable, Jesus illustrates a truth that has eternal repercussions in our lives: **God’s love twists the plot.**

I.

Jesus told this parable during Holy Week. On Sunday, he had ridden a donkey into Jerusalem to the triumphant shouts of “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he that comes in the name of the Lord!” But he knew that on Friday, the crowds would be shouting “Crucify him! Crucify him!” He knew that during that week, the history of Israel as the people of God would reach its climax. God chose them and protected them and spoke to them, all so that Jesus would be born and live and die as one of them. Jesus knew how little they understood their role so he pointed to God’s love. **God’s love twists the plot. There are plot twists all through Israel’s history.**

The parable uses a situation that was common in Jesus’ day. A wealthy man planted a vineyard as a business venture. He didn’t want to work the vineyard himself, so he found tenant farmers to care for it. He was supposed to get a set percentage of the crop when it came in. So, he left and went on a journey. When harvest time came, he sent a representative to collect his share. That’s when the story takes an evil turn. The tenants, who had been doing the work, didn’t want to share the crop with the owner. We can maybe understand their feelings, but probably not their course of action: they beat the servant and sent him away. Why did they do that? They were trying to send a message: they weren’t going to hand over the owner’s share.

So, if the owner wanted what was his, he was going to have to take it by force – which would've been totally possible for a rich and powerful man to do at that time. It's probably what his listeners expected to happen next. But notice how Jesus portrays the owner: he sends a second and then a third servant to collect his due. Clearly, they're not accompanied by security or police officers because the cycle of violence escalates. This should surprise us. Albert Einstein is supposed to have said that the definition of insanity is doing the same thing and expecting a different outcome. Yet, that's exactly what Jesus pictures the owner doing, over and over again.

What does all this mean? The vineyard is Israel and the owner is God. The tenant farmers are Israel's religious leaders, not just in Jesus' time, but throughout their history. The fruits are lives of love and faith lived by his people. Through most of Israel's history, her religious leaders failed to lead God's people to give him fruits. Who are the servants that God sent? The prophets. For hundreds of years, God sent prophets to call his people back to him. Again and again, they rejected those prophets, and even engaged in violence against them. But the first plot twist is Jesus portraying God's love as almost foolish. Again and again, he risks the lives of his most faithful servants to reach out to violent rebels. The end was almost always the same, but God kept doing it.

The religious leaders of Jesus' day did not lead the people to bring God fruits of faith any more than the leaders of the Old Testament had done. In the Old Testament, they actually led them to worship idols. In Jesus' day, they didn't do that. But they did give them all kinds of false promises that really pointed to their own efforts. They taught them to worship an idol hidden in their own hearts – themselves. That led to an even bigger plot twist: **“Then the owner of the vineyard said, ‘What shall I do? I will send my son, whom I love; perhaps they will respect him.’”** In real life, would anybody do this? Wouldn't most of us assume that we'd be putting our son in danger and only send him with a phalanx of bodyguards? But that's not what God's love did. Now, it was ridiculous for the tenants to think that killing the heir would somehow get them the vineyard. But criminals always think they'll get away with their crimes. And killing those men after they killed his son is exactly what would've happened then. But the plot twist in the parable and throughout all of Israel's history is that God didn't give up on his people. He sent Jesus at the end of that history to reclaim them and restore them and bring them back to him.

That love never stops making plot twists. St. Paul wrote, **“For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.”** It might seem like insanity to us, but God keeps doing the same things. He keeps reaching out to us in our sin and calling us back. He keeps kicking the can down the road on our punishment and pointing us to Jesus, our Savior, in hopes that we will repent. He keeps hoping to see the fruits that show our faith.

II.

Jesus is the biggest plot twist of all. Jesus came here to preach and teach. He came to fulfill all the promises God had made to Israel for 1500 years. He came to be the Savior they were waiting for. But to do that, Jesus came to die. The leaders of Israel actually made that happen, as Jesus knew they would when he told this parable. So, he put that in. **God's love twists the plot. There's a big plot twist at the end.**

When Jesus said, **“[The owner] will come and kill those tenants and give the vineyard to others.”** The people responded, **“May this never be!”** But they weren't reacting to the punishment in the parable. That's what they would've expected to happen. They were reacting to the whole situation. May it never happen that tenants would murder the owner's son in an attempt to steal his inheritance. May people in Israel never be so evil. And almost certainly, they understood the point Jesus was making. The leaders certainly did. Luke tells us that they wanted to arrest Jesus immediately because they understood that Jesus had spoken this parable against them. But they were afraid of the people. But the people should have understood the point, too. This wasn't the first time Jesus compared Israel to a vineyard. And he wasn't the first to do that. Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel all compared Israel to a vineyard. It was part of their preaching tradition. So, Jesus' point was not obscure or hard for them to follow. But the whole idea that God's people would reject his Son and kill him and bring on punishment horrified the people.

But it would happen. Jesus quoted the prophecy in Psalm 118: **“The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone.”** Israel rejected Jesus. God always knew that was going to happen. And it was sin. But that's where the biggest plot twist of all comes in: the rejected stone becomes the capstone. The murdered son becomes the Savior. The one who loses and dies, wins and lives. That's why Jesus came! He never imagined

that he was going to avoid the cross. He never planned to establish a kingdom here. He came to die. But Israel didn't have to murder him. The unbelievers who rejected him and conspired against him and handed him over to the Romans were still guilty. Jesus actually was dying for them – but they threw his sacrifice away in their pride and anger.

Jesus speaks to that, too, this morning, as he relates that final plot twist. He said, **“Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces, but he on whom it falls will be crushed.”** The stone is the stone the builders rejected and that now is the capstone. It's Jesus. What does it mean to fall on that stone and be broken to pieces? Very simply, that's repentance. That's what Lent is all about – recognizing that I sent Jesus to that cross. It wasn't just the hard hearts of the Jewish leaders or the crowd that shouted, “Crucify him!” My pride and sin caused that horrible death because Jesus was dying for me. He was dying for every time I disobeyed my parents or said horrible things to them when I was a teenager. He was dying for every time I failed to show love to my wife or my children. He was dying for every time you deserved better from me as your pastor. He was dying for all the sins I can't even remember and for the sin that I was born with, in my heart, that has come out so many times that counting my sins would be like counting the sand on the seashore or the stars in the sky. I sent him to the cross.

And so did you, because he was dying for the sin in your heart that makes your sins just as countless as mine are. He was dying for everything that ever made you feel guilty and for every memory of your own failings that tortures you. He was dying for all the sins that you don't remember but that God still can see. He was dying for the sins that you and I make excuses for and think just aren't that bad. All those things sent him to the cross. Nothing could illustrate more dramatically how guilty we really are.

Seeing that is being broken to pieces. But it's not being crushed. Because Jesus did die for us. He did suffer hell for us. He did wash all that sin away in his blood and then he did rise. Our sin didn't beat him. He beat it. That's God's great plot twist that comes at the climax of Israel's history: the Savior pays for us and all sinners and now we are forgiven and we will live. My friends, all those horrible sins that you and I remember and feel guilty about are paid for and forgiven. Even all those sins that we've forgotten, but that still should count against us, are all paid for, too. Being broken to pieces doesn't sound like fun and it's not supposed to. It hurts to feel that guilt and know that we did this. But Jesus puts us back together again as new and holy people, as God's own children, who will live with him forever. Jesus turns that pain and sorrow into joy.

But woe to those who are crushed, to those on whom the rock of Christ falls. Those are people, like the leaders of the Jews, who reject him and the work he came to do. They will spend eternity in hell. It's tempting for us say, “Whew – I'm glad that's not me!” We should be glad of that. But don't go too far down that road. Don't start thinking we're so much better than those evil men were. Don't start thinking God is lucky to have people like us. Don't start thinking that we would never do what they did. Why not? Because that's exactly how they came to be that way. Their sinful pride made them think that they were better than everybody else – that they didn't need a Savior. That's why they rejected Jesus. There is a warning here for us who are saved: the devil wants to turn our hope of heaven into pride that we believe, that we're so much better than all those liberals out there in Hollywood who oppose the truth and all those unbelievers out there who are blind and ignorant. The devil wants us to pat ourselves on the back because we avoided being crushed by that rock.

We didn't avoid anything. God worked in our hearts through the gospel and he gave us faith. God loved us and chose us and made us his. We are blessed beyond all telling because choosing sinners like us has to be a plot twist of eternal proportions. But God's love twisted the plot of our lives. Before he created the world he chose us to be freed from sin and death and hell and to live with him forever. He came to us in baptism and made us his. He comes to us day after day and forgives our sins and renews our faith. That is a plot twist that we can't help but celebrate and talk about and sing to God about forever. Amen.