

Today’s Parable of the Wicked Tenants appears in all 3 of the Synoptic Gospels—Matthew, Mark, and Luke—as well as outside of the biblical canon altogether in the Gospel of Thomas. Classified as an allegory, or extended metaphor, it was likely inspired by Isaiah 5, an Old Testament text with which it shares a great many images. Both planted vines, constructed a wall or a fence, and built a watchtower. In Isaiah’s “Song of the Unfruitful Vineyard,” the owner and tender of the vineyard is pretty clearly God, while the vineyard itself is explicitly identified as the nations of Israel and Judah. This might then lead us to logically conclude that the landowner in Jesus’ parable also represents God. But we should know by now that Jesus has a tendency to mix things up a little in his narratives.

Jesus relates this parable not to his disciples or to a crowd of followers atop a mountain, but to the chief priests and elders in the temple. They have just questioned his authority and more or less been rendered speechless by his clever retort when Jesus launches into storytelling mode. This is the second of three parables he offers up in response to their challenges. It’s pretty violent as Jesus’ narratives go, what with three separate vengeful episodes of murder. The obvious interpretation would be that the first two killings were intended to represent the sacrifices of the Hebrew prophets and martyrs, while the final death of the landowner’s son signifies Jesus’ imminent crucifixion.

While that makes sense on one level, we might want to take another look at the landowner. Nowhere in this narrative are we led to believe that he is necessarily a good or a god-like person. In fact, he was not a close-by or an attentive host, but, like many in Galilee at that time, an

absentee landlord. Like most absentee landlords in advanced agrarian society, he probably exploited the labor of his tenants by contracting for rent funds of 40 to 50% of their produce.<sup>1</sup> As the large number of slaves he was able to send attests, he was a land baron who enjoyed both wealth and privilege. With him Jesus' audience of religious authorities would have been able to relate. Not so the tenants, peasants who would tirelessly cultivate and weed vines for five full years before they yielded a single grape and who would not see hide nor hair of their landlord until that time. By the rabbinic law of imminent domain, they could have rightfully taken over the land after three years. Instead they grew additional crops of grain and vegetables just to sustain themselves. And on those crops, too, they would likely be required to pay that same outrageous rent...

Needless to say, this image of God would have been quite terrifying to a class of Jewish peasants who lived a daily reality of oppression and dispossession. But even more so were that God to respond to their protests in the manner prescribed by Jesus' listeners--signing off on a death warrant for all of them because they had stood up for themselves. Yet this is clearly not Jesus' intention, as he goes on to castigate the priests and elders, saying "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." (Matthew 21:42-44, NRSV) And so Jesus reinforces and builds upon the message of his "Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard," from one chapter earlier in Matthew 20. The landowner in *that parable* was so generous as to pay a full day's wages to even those laborers who had worked just a few short

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<sup>1</sup> Waetjen, Herman C.: *Intimations of the Year of Jubilee in the Parables of the Wicked Tenants and Workers in the Vineyard*, <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=28> from *The Christian Century*, May 20-27, 1998, pp. 524-531.

hours, though he was under no obligation whatsoever to do so. That story was summarized by Jesus with the following remark, “So the last will be first, and the first will be last.” (Matthew 20:16, NRSV) In effect, Jesus has lured the chief priests and elders into a trap, providing a character to whom they could relate, only to reverse it on them, condemning the landowner’s and their lack of compassion and justice for the poor. Subverting their status quo where the upstanding and religious authorities were automatically assumed not only to deserve respect, but to reflect the ways and the passions of God and God’s kingdom.

Now at this point you may be wondering what any of this has to do with the Center for Progressive Christianity’s 8 Points. Fair enough. In the past year and a half, we have been through a number of Jesus’ parables together. Without fail, there have been reversals and surprises. Always pointing away from human measures of worthiness and justice, toward the ever broader expanse of God’s love and mercy, toward God’s preference for the downtrodden, the sick, the poor, and the weak.

I don’t think it’s too big a stretch of the imagination to say that today we live in an age that bears some similarity to Jesus’ time and to that of the Hebrew prophets. More and more, the needs of the poor and our nation’s commitment to justice for all are getting lost in the political shuffle, drowned out by the rancor of the privileged and the would-be privileged. And all too often these distractions are associated with a certain type of Christianity. For many in our country, is the only kind of Christianity they know exists. ... You know that old saying about squeaky wheels... Many who might otherwise be curious seekers are repulsed by our faith tradition because they associate it with hatred and judgment. Many who have been hurt by other forms of Christianity do not know that there are other alternatives, that Christianity is supposed to be redemptive and

life-giving, not punishing and toxic. Some of us were once them. We owe it to them and to ourselves to articulate another way that is broad, all embracing, healing. And to let them know we're here, whenever they're ready to take a leap of faith. I don't mean to imply that becoming an affiliate of the Center for Christianity will accomplish all of this, but I do believe it is a first step in that direction.

And so, as we prepare to vote on this at our Semi-Annual Meeting this afternoon, I invite you to hear the 8 Points again and all together and notice how broad and open they are, much like our UCC tenets. I believe there is room for us all in these 8 Points, and I hope you will too.

1. Believe that following the path and teachings of Jesus can lead to an awareness and experience of the Sacred and the Oneness and Unity of all life
2. Affirm that the teachings of Jesus provide but one of many ways to experience the Sacredness and Oneness of life, and that we can draw from diverse sources of wisdom in our spiritual journey
3. Seek community that is inclusive of ALL people, including but not limited to: Conventional Christians and questioning skeptics, Believers and agnostics, Women and men, Those of all sexual orientations and gender identities, Those of all classes and abilities
4. Know that the way we behave towards one another is the fullest expression of what we believe
5. Find grace in the search for understanding and believe there is more value in questioning than in absolutes
6. Strive for peace and justice among all people
7. Strive to protect and restore the integrity of our Earth

8. Commit to a path of life-long learning, compassion, and selfless love.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.tpc.org/about/8points.cfm>.