



SERMONS THAT WORK

Proper 22 (A)

A Different Ending

[RCL] Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20; Psalm 19; Philippians 3:4b-14; Matthew 21:33-46

A form of wordplay people think is either great or terrible, depending on whether or not they're fans, is the pun. You know, jokes that play on words with different meanings or words that sound alike. Silly things like, *Why do cows have bells? Because their horns don't work. What's the best thing about Switzerland? Well, their flag is a big plus. How does Moses make his coffee? Hebrews it. Need an ark? I Noah guy.* Starting a sermon with even one pun may seem like, you know, cruel and unusual *pun-ishment*.

What makes puns work is that they make us make new connections. There's that beat, then the moment when we get it and either giggle or groan. *Oh, I know-a guy!* Speaking of Noah: *Why did Noah punish the chickens on the ark? They were using fowl language.*

Cognitive scientists have said that the delight we experience, the mirth that comes from that *aha!* moment, is an important part of evolutionary development for humans. They say our brains simplify the world by creating and relying on a series of assumptions. This shortcut of relying on expectations helps us go through a day without having to think about each and every little thing. But sometimes our brains get it wrong. Our expectations are incorrect. Depending on the situation, this could be quite dangerous. So, our brains developed a reward for making new connections.

When we make new connections, disrupting our assumptions and overturning our expectations, our brains get a reward: delight, a moment of pleasure, mirth. This reward helps our brains stay on the lookout for gaps between our assumptions and reality. We get a jolt of joy when we think, *Oh, here's another way to look at this, here's another possibility.*

This works for all kinds of stories: not just comedies; mysteries and drama, too—anytime there's a new connection made, an ending we hadn't seen coming.

Jesus told a lot of stories—parables—and he told them for the same reason: to change our expectations, to get us to look at the world and ourselves in a new way, to make some connections we might not make otherwise.

He said things like, “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed,” and we can imagine people saying, “Where's he going with this?” Like, “A shepherd had 100 sheep and left 99% of his inventory to go in search of one who was lost,” and people say, “What kind of a shepherd would do that?” He told one about weeds

growing among wheat, and when the farm workers come and say, “You want us to pull up the weeds?” the owner says, “Nah, let them grow together, I’ll sort it out later.” What?

Jesus told stories to upend our assumptions about “this is just the way things are” or “I know how this turns out.” When we take Jesus’ stories to heart, we may have several *aha!* moments, but unlike a riddle or a pun, they’re stories we have to come back to again and again, because they leave us, not with, “Oh, I get it!” but with a moment of decision, “Okay, now what? Now how will I live? Now what will I do? What decision will I make?” Because Jesus tells stories, not just for a moment of mirth, but to save our lives.

That’s really apparent with today’s parable, which is no joke. It’s usually called, “The Parable of the Wicked Tenants.” Jesus tells this story about a landowner who rented property to some farmers. In Jesus’ day, this was a very common arrangement. The usual terms of the agreement were that the farmers were allowed to live on the land and farm it, and in return, they had to give the landowner a percentage of the crop they harvested as rent.

In Jesus’ story, when harvest time comes, the landowner sends some of his servants to collect what was due to him. But the farmers aren’t willing to hand over any of their crops. Instead, they beat and kill the servants, maybe thinking they would show the landowner who is really in charge.

After a while, when he hadn’t received any word from the farm, the landowner sends some more servants to collect his share of the crops. But once again, the farmers kill the servants.

Finally, the landowner sends his own son to the farmers, hoping that the farmers will respect and listen to the son. But the farmers treat his son like all the others: they take him outside the vineyard and kill him. They think they’ve shown the landowner who is really in charge.

Then Jesus asks the people how the story should end. He asks, “What do you think? When the owner of the vineyard comes, what do you think he’s going to do?” The people answer, “Surely he’s going to come and get those horrible farmers. He’s going to put them to death. He’ll make them pay for what they’ve done!” In other words, the crowd is sure that when the landowner comes, he’ll play by the farmers’ rules, he’ll go by the farmers’ expectations, he’ll do what we all expect— respond to violence with more violence.

Notice: This is not Jesus’ conclusion to the parable. This is how the people say it *should* end. They’ll get what they deserve. This is just how things go. Isn’t this just the way of the world? The way things work?

But what if it’s not?

If this story is an allegory, it’s pretty clear that God is the landowner, the servants are the prophets, and the landowner’s son is Jesus, who is sent by God to God’s people. But people don’t listen to or respect him. They kill him instead.

So, does God respond to Jesus’ death in the vengeful and bloody way we might expect—in the way the people say the story will end? No. The story of Good Friday and Easter shows us this is not what God did. Despite

the ways Jesus was abused, despite his death as an innocent man, despite the ways those who serve God and good have been mistreated throughout time, God refuses to meet our expectations, go by our assumptions, play by our rules. Violence and death will not be the end of the story. Rather than revenge, God chose resurrection.

Isn't that amazing? Not just that God has the power to raise Jesus from the dead, but that God is willing to, not just for love of Jesus, but for love of the whole world. That God has any affection left for people who treat one another and even God's own son with such brutality is astonishing. That God has any hope left for the world is absolutely, well, divine. We can marvel at what must have been in the heart of God on the night of Good Friday, or all day long on Saturday. There is Jesus lying dead in the grave, his body broken and cold. And there is the whole human family, most not even realizing the gravity of what they've done, and some of them smug that they've killed the son.

But here's God who gives new life to the Son and says to him, "We cannot stop now. This is not the end. They are still my children, still your brothers and sisters. It is not my will that any of them should perish. It's time to make their salvation complete." And God can't even wait for the sun to come up on Easter morning before the risen Jesus Christ is stepping forth from the grave, going ahead to meet the disciples who had abandoned him, to send them on his behalf into the world, to give us all another chance to remember the story God is writing, a story where we can throw aside our expectations, and instead, expect good to defeat evil, forgiveness to heal guilt, unity to overcome estrangement, joy to conquer despair.

That is the ending God wrote to the parable of the wicked tenants.

God raised Jesus from the dead so we can learn new ways to be in the world: God's ways. God shows mercy rather than hatred so we can forgive and reconcile instead of trying to get revenge. God shows love so we can break stupid cycles that lead to more and more misery; live out of God's future instead of repeating the tragedy of the past. Love.

Do you have any stories in your life that need a different ending than just the same old thing? Any ongoing drama in your life where instead of just meeting expectations of more of the same old, same old, you might allow God to write a new chapter? A new ending? Is there some way God might use this parish to do something new, something unexpected, something life-giving in this community? Some way to say or show more violence is not the solution to violence?

Jesus asked the people, "Now how do you think the story should end?"

Today, Jesus asks us, "Now how do you think the story should end?"

***The Rev. Dr. Amy Richter** is an Episcopal priest, currently living in Mont-Tremblant, Quebec, Canada. She is the author and editor of several books, including *Common Prayer: Reflections on Episcopal Worship* and *Saving Words: 20 Redemptive Words Worth Rescuing*, published by Cascade.*