

The Parable is (Mercifully) on Us

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Billy Dick was 6 years old and sitting in Sunday School at the Lakewood Methodist Church in Dallas. It was Easter, and his teacher was telling the story of the crucifixion. Billy Dick squirmed as the gruesome events of Good Friday unfolded. Finally he thrust up his hand and waived it in the air until the teacher acknowledged him. And when she did, Billy Dick stood up and declared, "If Roy Rogers had been there, those dirty S.O.B.s would not have been able to do it!"

The reason the story of Billy Dick's mildly profane Easter outburst made its way to us all these years later is because his cousin was a guy named Stanley Hauerwas, who grew up to become a theologian, a not always so mildly profane one at that. More specifically, his cousin Stanley became a theologian who worried about our tendency as Christians to confuse God with Roy Rogers.

That's my oversimplified synopsis of one of Stanley Hauerwas's theological interests. But the God as Roy Rogers problem really isn't confined to the imaginations of six-year-old boys. Long after we've learned the hard way not to stand up and blurt out what we really think in Sunday School, aren't there still days when we would still like a cowboy hero God to show up? One who wins the day by being infinitely quicker on the draw. Whose aim is perfect, and whose Resurrection was that satisfying moment when evil finally got what it had coming to it. Got it right between those lidless eyes.

The parable of the wicked tenants seems made to satisfy the Billy Dick in all of us. As the violence of the tenants escalates with each servant who is sent to collect the owner's profits, so does our indignation at the injustice. It seems Jesus finally has the sense to tell a story in which the bad guys get their just deserts. The landowner will put those wretches to a miserable death and lease the vineyard to some new, good guy tenants and live happily ever after.

It's even more satisfying that Jesus catches the religious leaders he's telling the parable to in the trap that he's set. He has them deliver the punch line, right before they realize the parable is on them.

Which means... Wait a minute. Back up. This parable is a pretty obvious allegory, isn't it? God is the vineyard owner. The servants are the prophets. Jesus is the son. And Israel's religious leaders are the wicked tenants, right? So, when the chief priests say how the parable will end, that means the violent, murderous tenants in the story are the ones who are telling us how the vineyard owner is going to respond. These people don't know the mind of the vineyard owner at all. These are the folks who thought it was a good idea to kill his son, because they thought they'd somehow then get the inheritance!

Let me say it even more plainly. That bit about the wretches being put to a miserable death? Jesus never says that's how the story will end. The people trapped in the old vengeful model of justice said that. The people he was telling the parable against.

Maybe this story doesn't have the moral arc of a Roy Rogers show after all. And it hinges on another strange detail that seems just as unbelievable as the inheritance going to the murderers. What sane landowner thinks it's a good idea to send his son after three servants in a row have been beaten up, killed, and stoned? He at least should have sent the boy with a six shooter at his side, armed for a fight. Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice, shame on me. Fool me three times, shame on both of us. Fool me four times... well the old saying doesn't extend to the foolishness of the vineyard owner.

And neither do we. Too often in our lives, we don't reach the holy, merciful foolishness of this vineyard owner whose nature is to give whatever he has to give in hopes that we will learn another way to be.

You see, this is a different kind of parable from all the rest in one essential way. It's a story about the story it is nested within. It's an allegory about Jesus's own life and death, isn't it? A death that will come just a few chapters on in the gospel of Matthew.

The religious leaders realize it's an allegory too. But they assume it will play out like all our favorite stories about justice do. And that's what trips them up. The son will be killed, but the good news of the gospel is that it will not play out like the stories we tell. Not in the least.

Earlier in Matthew, Jesus says, "Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. For with the judgement you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get." And this is precisely what happens with the chief priests and Pharisees, is it not? They pronounce judgment on themselves because they're in the judgment pronouncing business in a judgment pronouncing world.

By the end of Matthew's gospel, Jesus will be put to a violent death by the defenders of earthly order and justice. But, maybe you remember that Matthew does not end with God's vengeance for the death of his son. It ends on a hillside in Galilee, with a handful of followers, some worshiping, some doubting, and the risen Christ saying to them all, "Remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

Vengeful retribution is the way things are made right in *our* stories. Not God's. Mercy is what God's story begins with. And mercy is how it ends.

The poet Scott Cairns once wrote, "Justice is, without question, a laudable goal whenever and wherever injustice abounds, but I'm fairly certain that our love for justice is wrong when it eclipses mercy. Mercy, after all, is...the higher virtue, the virtue to which we ought to be giving our hearts."

Fourteen hundred years earlier, Isaak of Syria wrote, "Do not say that God is just; He has not shown justice in His dealings with you."

Friends, we are still tripping and falling over the inverted, impossible logic of the cross, and it is breaking us to pieces, just as Jesus said it would. We tell ourselves we're on the side of justice, when mercy was and is God's way by which things are set straight. Because mercy was knit deeply by God into the way things are.

Isaak of Syria said something else about mercy. Something that sounds appropriate to this feast day of St. Francis as well. It is wild and overstated, as mystic saints and parable tellers tend to be. But it's one monk's image of the liberation that awaits when our wicked tenant model of vengeful justice is broken to pieces by the merciful logic of the cross.

"What is a merciful heart?" St. Isaak asked. "It is a heart on fire for the whole of creation, for humanity, for the birds, for the animals, for demons and for all that exists... For this reason, such a person offers up tearful prayer... even for irrational beasts, for the enemies of the truth, and for those who harm him or her, that they be protected and receive mercy... because of the great compassion that burns without measure in a heart that is in the likeness of God."

We can't stay in such a state all the time. My therapist wife reminds me firmly that we're not meant to. But the reason you and I can find ourselves healed and made a little more whole, in moments when our hearts learn to burn in that way, is simple. It's because the merciful heart of God burns just so for you.