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Wicked Bad Tenants are Really Bad

Having been born and raised in Ohio, I have prided myself with having what I think is a non-descript broad Midwestern accent. Though I have lived and studied for a time in the South, I never picked up too much of the drawl – rarely saying ‘y’all’ or ‘fixin’.

My years in central Connecticut did not impact me as much as my children, who did pick up the peculiar way locals there say the words ‘New Britain’ or ‘Latin.’ Now living in northern New England, I have yet to start speaking the way locals here pronounce words like ‘harbor,’ ‘lobster,’ ‘chowder’ or ‘awesome.’

And then there is the quintessential slang word of this part of the word. ‘Wicked.’ That student is wicked smart, or it is a wicked cold day or that game last night was wicked crazy. It is the regional adjective turned adverb. Trying to cash in on the popularity of the phrase there are reality shows on television such as ‘Wicked Tuna’ filmed out of Gloucester, chronically the dangers of deep sea fishing.

There was a time, centuries ago, here in New England when the word wicked was associated with demons and evil. Many of us probably heard of the stories of the Salem Witch trials in late 1600’s: the word wicked deriving from the Old English word for witch.

The Merriam-Webster dictionary goes back even further. “Wickedness, it seems, is an epidemic in children's literature and fairy tales. Cinderella has her wicked stepmother; the Queen in Snow White is often called the Wicked Queen, and of course, there's the Wicked Witch of the West in The Wizard of Oz, whose origin story forms the basis of the spinoff novel and musical Wicked.”

For the second consecutive week, we hear a parable about a vineyard – the tried and true Biblical image of a luxurious and prized part of the world created by and tended by God. Unlike a forest of trees or a field of wild flowers, a vineyard does not just grow on its own. It takes planting, pruning and care. It is a product of a relationship between the Creator and the created.

Yet the Biblical vineyard is not paradise – it is no garden of Eden. When things go bad, they go really bad. God was a demanding landowner as it turns out. The prophet Isaiah describes it this way: “When God expected grapes, why did the vineyard produce wild grapes?” (Isaiah 5:1-7). “When the Lord expected justice, what God saw was bloodshed.” In response, the pruning and protecting took a pause – the vineyard became overgrown with briars and thorns and no water would rain down upon it. God was not pleased.

For so many of us who have tried so hard to disavow the angry God thinking and theology that we may have learned in parochial school or from Old School Old Time preachers, I wonder if there still might be something to gain from imagining a God who is not too pleased with the vineyard that was planted so long ago and lent out to those of us who live in it.

Jesus tells a parable about some very wicked tenants. Not the cool wicked Boston kind, but the evil wicked variety.

What were the wicked tenants guilty of in this story? It all started out promising: there was a fence, a wine press, and a watchtower to guard against danger. All the things necessary for a good harvest of grapes. The tenants who leased the land were left in charge to do what tenants do: care for the land. At harvest time, the owner came a calling to collect the grapes. These were pretty simple terms. Care for what you are agreed to care for while the owner was away. Yet as we hear, the tenants were awful and cruel to anyone sent by the owner to collect. These wicked tenants beat them and killed them. A clear break with one of the clearest commandments that Moses received from God: “you shall not murder.” Even the son of the owner was not spared. They not only did not respect the son – the heir -- they threw him out and killed him.

What is the point Jesus is trying to make? Who is the audience? And where might we be in this story of judgement?

We live in a time where evil and wicked acts can be broadcast right into our living rooms. There is little escaping them. Cell phone footage. Endless YouTube clips. Today we will pray a litany for those who died last week in Las Vegas.

A month or so ago I mentioned that I was growing weary and tired of the news. From the responses I received at the back of the church I sensed there were others in that camp. Since the events of 9/11 some 16 years I have been operating under the thesis that tragedy at that scale can bring about some really bad theology. The kind of theology that can make one feel that we are powerless to act in a world where cruelty wages war with goodness.

I have accumulated some go-to responses over these years.

“Be not afraid.” Echoing Jesus. I would cite how many times Jesus brought calm to a moment of panic and fear. Promising to be us until the end of the ages, the Risen Christ stood in the breach with his believers and declared that death and evil will not overcome us.

I have also gone the naming evil route. Admitting that we in Episcopal Church don’t talk about a personified devil, any mention of evil is the writ-large kind -- left for institutional ism’s like racism or the phobias that distort our appreciation of the fullness of humanity: xenophobia or homophobia. Citing the baptismal covenant, we strive to persevere in resisting evil. At times, we have to name evil acts.

Another thing I’ve done is to focus on goodness. Small – random or intentional – acts of kindness to the people we meet every day to remind us how we are connected. How humanity is still connected and that we are to see in the other and our neighbor the good we hope to achieve in our own lives.

The medieval Italian St. Catherine of Siena wrote this: “keep in mind that each of you has your own vineyard. But everyone is joined to your neighbors’ vineyard without dividing lines. They are so joined together, in fact, that you cannot do good or evil for yourself without doing the same for your neighbors.”

For me, I try not to confuse optimism with hope. Am I optimistic that our political leaders will find the common ground necessary to try to seek some kind of compromise on a whole range of

issues – including if it is possible to prevent another Las Vegas from happening? Optimistic no. Hopeful yes.

Dr. Cornell West, a fixture on television during turbulent times, makes a claim for what he calls ‘audacious hope.’ “And it’s not optimism. I’m in no way an optimist. Optimism is a notion that there’s sufficient evidence that would allow us to infer that if we keep doing what we’re doing, things will get better. I don’t believe that. I’m a prisoner of hope, that’s something else.”

In facing what we face today – dislocation, division, uncertainty, and fear stoked by acts of terror and hate -- I put in a plug for church and worship. I’ve said: we need each other. To lean on in crises, to celebrate joys, to open up our spaces to the wider community, and to grow from the exercise and discipline of prayer. Ancient meets modern: sing, pray, break bread, visit the lonely, be filled with God’s spirit and go out into the world a little bit more whole and hope-filled than when we entered this space.

The judgement of the parable of the wickedly wicked tenants is harsh. “The Kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom.” “And when the chief priests and the Pharisees heard this, they realized that he was speaking about them.”

One of the harshest criticisms that one can make of another is to call that person careless. To entrust something of value to a friend, who forgets about it or breaks it. To enter into a relationship with another person and to squander their trust with deception.

While some might hear the Ten Commandments as God wagging God’s finger at humanity to keep them from messing up, they can also be seen as ways to care for our relation with God and each other. Be faithful to the one who gave us life. Take care of the relationships that make up our lives: don’t lie, be envious, take what is not yours, keep the promises we make. Respect life in all of its forms.

We are given this one life. Remember that Christians believe in Resurrection not reincarnation. This is our turn in God’s vineyard. Let us take good care of what we’ve been given. Let us not reject those who come to us with words that we need to hear: peace over war. Trust over fear. Love over hate. Open hearts vs. closed minds.