

**Pentecost 18A, Proper 22. Matthew 21:33-46.**  
**The Feast of St. Francis. October 4, 2020.**

This is how violence works. It captures and dries out our imaginations, so that we have more difficulty remembering to look for alternatives. Jesus spins this allegorical story of wicked vineyard tenants for the religious leaders. It draws them in, but they don't understand it until it's too late. We can probably add it up like a math equation: the vineyard is Israel, the landowner is God, the produce collectors are the prophets, the tenants are the authorities in Israel, and then of course the son is Jesus, who actually will be killed just days after this exchange. So God put the beautiful vineyard of Israel into the care of some leaders. When God sent the prophets as messengers indicating what God wanted, the leaders attacked the prophets. This happened over and over until God sent the Son to bring the message of God's desires, and they kill the Son, too.

As a little allegorical telling of religious history, it isn't that extraordinary. We know that Jesus and the religious leaders are at odds, and that these kinds of pointed parables are a pretty standard part of this sort of controversy. If anything stands out about it, it is Jesus' boldness in his hostility to the proper authorities on their turf and the elevated level of violence in it. But besides giving us an interpretive history of Israel's religious life, it also really does demonstrate for us what violence does to our minds and hearts. Jesus tells this story of escalating violence and then, did you notice, the religious leaders themselves provide the final blow.

Jesus asks, "when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?" And it is the tenants themselves, the religious leaders, who say, "He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the harvest time." No he won't, not if the owner of the vineyard is the God revealed in Jesus Christ. The leaders condemn themselves, but they don't even do that accurately. Jesus affirms that they are at risk of losing the kingdom of God in favor of others who bear the fruit of the kingdom, but he never affirms the dream of vengeance they inadvertently suggest for themselves.

A pattern of violence, physical or rhetorical, narrows our hearts until, unless we are very watchful, all we can imagine in response is more violence. These leaders fall right into the trap of a violent pattern and they forget to imagine that God might be different than the patterns we create. Jesus comes and disrupts the cycle of violence by being a god who will not hit back. He is a god who would rather die than kill us, and responds to our violence not with vengeance, but with resurrection and the gift of new life poured out for all.

As we see so much violence and turmoil in our streets and as the rhetoric of this political season becomes increasingly violent and hate-filled, we are all prone to letting our hearts narrow. This doesn't take active wickedness on our part; in this environment it can happen through sheer inertia. It takes active measures to keep our imaginations open to the alternative God provides to respond to violence and hatred with new life and more love.

This is why I'm especially grateful this year for the silliness of the pet blessing amid the seriousness of the witness of St. Francis. Each year on this Sunday I tell you that we are wrong to make St. Francis into a sappy, skinny Santa Claus. That in fact his life was one of great sacrifice

and extreme courage. The right image of St. Francis is not Snow White orchestrating all the animals cleaning the cottage, but the nobleman-turned-beggar serving the poor and ill, the audacious fool sneaking into the sultan's military camp to try to broker peace. And this year, especially, remembering St. Francis with a pet blessing reminds us of the irrepressible blessing of God, that cannot be contained to members of one political party, or one nation, or one race, or even to humans. It spills out from every container we might offer for it and gushes down down onto us, our pets, the groaning earth, and even onto our enemies.

Today we aren't just blessing our animals for the sake of a cute photo opportunity. It's not a desperate ploy to give people a reason to come to church. It is a radical retraining of our imaginations to break the pattern of violence and fear so that we may remember God's alternative of forgiveness, blessing, and love. Forgiveness, blessing, and love of course don't mean an acceptance of evil or an abdication of responsibility. On the contrary, the blessing of the animals reminds us of just how deep our call to care for the last and least goes—always further than we think, always beyond the limits we find ourselves drawing.

Violence is easy. Resurrection is harder and better. Amen.