

**A Communion Meditation:
He's Talking to Us**

Exodus 20: 1-4, 7-9, 12-20; Matthew 21:33-46

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Here's one of our biggest challenges when reading the Bible: *believing that it really is speaking to us.*

You see, the Bible is dynamic, not static. If it was static, its message would be locked in the past, a word only for a bygone generation. But since it is dynamic, the Bible's message is alive and speaks to each successive generation. The writer of the book of Hebrews puts it this way:

Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.

When I was in seminary, we were taught that the real power of a text is in the writer or speaker's intended meaning. So the first question we ask of a text is not, "What does it mean to me?" That's what I was taught when I was a teen. We would sit in a circle and go around the circle and tell what a particular text meant to us. No, the first question we ask of a text should be, "What did it mean to Paul when he wrote it" or "What did it mean to Jesus when he spoke it?" Once we find that, then we turn it to ourselves. If that was what Paul meant, then what does that mean for me? If that is what Jesus was trying to communicate, then what does that mean for me? That, I argue, is how we should engage the Bible because it is dynamic. Its message is not just for a bygone generation. It is for you and me today.

That was a painful realization for the chief priests and Pharisees in our text for today. Jesus told a scathing parable. Today we call it The Parable of the Wicked Tenants. At the end of the parable, Matthew makes this telling observation: "When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they realized that he was speaking about them."

That must have been a painful realization because Jesus was saying that they were the wicked tenants in the parable. Here's what happened. A man carefully prepared his vineyard, Jesus said. He built a fence around it, dug a wine press in it, and even built a watchtower to watch for thieves and wild animals. He went to great length and expense to prepare his vineyard. Then, Jesus said, he leased the vineyard to tenants. Their responsibility was to tend the vineyard and at harvest time turn over the harvest to the owner. At harvest time, Jesus said the owner sent his workers to collect the harvest. But the tenants refused to turn over the harvest. Instead they beat one of his workers, killed another, and stoned yet another. So the owner sent other workers, more than the first time. The tenants treated them just as badly as the first group. Finally, the owner of the vineyard sent his son thinking, "They will respect my son." But they didn't. They seized the son, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him. End of parable.

Jesus then asked this question, "When the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?"

The chief priests and Pharisees answered correctly, "He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at harvest time."

As those words rolled off their tongues, they realized the meaning of the parable. Jesus was talking about them. They were the wicked tenants.

That's you, Jesus was saying to them. God called you to tend God's vineyard, God's world, all God's people. You were to grow people of righteousness, people of love and grace and justice. God sent the prophets to collect the harvest, but you had nothing to give. Instead, you stoned and killed the prophets. Finally, God sent his Son, and you threw him out and killed him. So, God will find other tenants to occupy and run his vineyard.

That's when Matthew makes his observation, "they realized that he was speaking about them."

He was. But, here's what's important for us to understand: he was talking to us too. Because the Bible is dynamic. Because it is not locked in a bygone generation. Every age is vulnerable to becoming like the chief priests and

Pharisees. We mustn't say, "Not me! Never. I would never be like the chief priests and Pharisees." No, we must be open to the reality that we can become just like them. We must be diligently on guard, watching for those things Jesus condemned in the religious leaders of his day. Are we becoming self-righteous? I know we don't want to think about that, but Jesus challenges us to be honest with ourselves. Are we becoming legalistic? Before you say, "No, not me!" look carefully. Has our faith become more about pretense and show? I'm asking that we be painfully honest with ourselves and believe that Jesus really is talking to us.

And there is no time or place better for honest introspection than now at this Table. This Table points to the most challenging, loving, and faithful figure in human history and the extent to which he was willing to go to be faithful to God. He has called us and others to be tenants of his vineyard. All he asks is that we tend his vineyard well and have something to give back to him at harvest time: some goodness, some love, some graciousness, some righteousness. No, it's not just for a bygone generation. He was talking to us.

A Prayer of Confession is printed in your worship guide. Madison is going to lead us as we confess our sins together.