

Stumbling our way to grace

Find the readings here: http://www.lectionarypage.net/YearA_RCL/Pentecost/AProp22_RCL.html#ot1

This parable from Matthew is hard to listen to: it is violent and filled with judgment. And, as with many of Jesus' stories, it doesn't entirely make sense. Early manuscripts don't include the troubling passage which asserts that,

“The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces;
and it will crush anyone on whom it falls.”

Does it even belong there? We don't know.

Jesus tells the story in response to a challenge, earlier in the chapter, from some of the religious leaders. They wanted to know who gave him his authority. So Jesus reflects on how religious leaders generally don't like prophets, who make life difficult for those who want to protect the status quo.

Yesterday I attended a celebratory service for a colleague who is beginning a new ministry as a rector here in the diocese. In his sermon, Bishop Marc Andrus spoke of his great love of Greek, how he reads it daily, and some surprising things he's recently come to understand through his studies.

Now I, my friends, am no great scholar of Greek. I took my whole one semester in seminary, and I loved it. Even so, with my limited knowledge, I know that the word used in Jesus' response about the “corner stone” may also, and perhaps here, more correctly, be translated as “stumbling block.”

Like the prophets before him who were stumbling blocks who challenged leadership gone astray, so Jesus is both an essential stone—supporting the building of the tradition—and a serious trip-hazard for the spiritually self-righteous.

This story tells us a lot about our expectations. For example, who says this?

“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.”

When Jesus asks, “what will the landowner do?” It is the **hearers** of the story who come to this conclusion.¹ **Not** Jesus.

If we read his parable to be about God and those entrusted with bearing fruit for God, it's important to note that Jesus does NOT share the same conclusion with his hearers.

The projections of violent judgment are the response of those who are listening and perhaps feeling judged themselves by the story.

¹ Many thanks to the great insights, as usual, found here: <http://girardianlectionary.net/reflections/year-a/proper22a/> Especially, the note regarding the work of Raymond Schwager in his book *Jesus in the Drama of Salvation*.

But what ultimately happens is what we proclaim here at Easter, and every time we gather to break bread together. God in Jesus shows up, wounds still there, and says, "Peace be with you."

We pray:

We remember his death.
We celebrate his resurrection.
We await his coming in glory.

And Christianity has long painted that "coming again" to include a lot of casting out and destruction of those perceived as infidels.

But instead his glory is an invitation, a welcome, a word of healing.

Such is the ever upside-down world of God's love.
It is a stumbling block if we want power to bowl over those we consider wrong.
Because it is, instead, the strength of love to heal and bless.

It is a force that demonstrates, again and again, that "winning" means grace for everyone. God's love is ever full of surprises like this, and if we don't fall over them now and again, we're really not paying attention.

These giant blocks of love and forgiveness, which are the life and teachings of Jesus, and the ongoing presence of Christ With Us, are sitting right in the middle of the path of our expectations, our expectations that are shaped by the world in which we live, flavored by acts of violence, large and small.

A great deal of violence has been done against the Jewish people by Christians who have read this story and others like it as a condemnation of their whole tribe. That is not what this is about.

Jesus was speaking to the religious authorities who had just challenged him.

His criticism fits Christianity through the ages, as well as any other group that preaches a God of retribution rather than one of grace and unlimited love.

The love of God is scandalous in its breadth. It should trip us up on a regular basis.

And when we fall, may we look up, and see that the real story is not the that we have failed, but rather that not even our worst failings exclude us from being brought back into great the love that fuels all of life.