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Title: Crazy Landowner

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Scripture: [2 Samuel 12:1-7](#), [Psalm 51:1-2](#), [Isaiah 5:1-7](#), [Psalm 118: 19-24](#)

Text: [Matthew 21:33-43](#)

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Jesus is the master storyteller and he is presenting new material in the last week of his life. The chief priest and elders are irritated because Jesus acted without their blessing. They confront him. "By whose authority are you doing these things, cleansing the Temple, doing and saying crazy things? Who?" In response to their questions,

Jesus tells them stories that get under their skin. "Have you heard the one about the man who had two sons? Each was asked to go to a vineyard, one did and one didn't." The chief priests and elders didn't think much of that story because Jesus suggested that tax collectors and prostitutes move to the front of the kingdom line. To put it mildly, it irked them.

Jesus thought he needed to make them good and mad. So he tells them another story, a special type of story called an allegory. You remember from high school that an allegory has a one to one relationship between those inside the story with those outside the story. An example is George Orwell Animal Farm which turned seventy-five in August. It is a story about a group of farm animals who rebel against their human farmer, hoping to create a society where the animals can be equal, free, and happy. It was originally an allegory about communism and the pigs are Napoleon and Snowball represented Stalin and Trotsky.

Political allegories with animals are popular. During the cold war, if you told a story or drew a cartoon of a bear and an eagle, you knew the bear was Russia and the eagle the United States. We are 30 days from our election. If I told you a story about an elephant and a donkey in a boxing match, you'd know it was a political allegory about Democrats and Republicans duking it out. ¹

Jesus didn't invent allegorical stories. An ancient and famous example is the Parable of the Ewe told by the prophet Nathan to King David. David committed adultery with his next-door neighbor, Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah. When she told David she was pregnant, David tried to cover it up by

bringing Uriah home from war to spend a romantic evening with Bathsheba. When Uriah refused to enjoy the companionship of his wife while his men were at war, David sent Uriah to the front lines of the battle where he was killed. David took something that didn't belong to him and then tried to cover up his sin with an even greater sin. David thought he'd gotten away with it but then along came Nathan the prophet with an allegory about a little lamb.

Two men lived in the same city. One was rich with huge flocks of sheep; one was poor. The only thing he owned was a little ewe lamb. This lamb was so special that it was treated as a member of the family. She'd eat off his plate at dinner and even sleep in his bed. It was like a daughter to him. When a traveler visited the rich man, he was too stingy to take one of his lambs to prepare a feast for his guest and he took the poor man's lamb and used it instead.

David didn't know it was allegorical. He thought Nathan was reporting something that happened. So he erupted with anger and shouted, "As the Lord lives, the man who did this deserves to die." Nathan then uttered these famous words, "You are the man!" It is a classic allegory. Uriah is the poor man, Bathsheba the ewe lamb and David, is the one who took what wasn't his. A "gotcha" allegory told again and again until it came to define the form, if not the phrase, you are the man. You are the man. (2 Samuel 12:1-7)

It was effective. A good allegory is. David repents. He even writes a famous Psalm of repentance about the affair. "Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin." (Psalm 51:1-2) The allegory worked. David repented.

With this as the backdrop, Jesus tells another story to the chief priest and elders. They immediately recognize an allegory. Why? Jesus is quoting another famous allegory from the fifth chapter of Isaiah. It begins, "Let me sing for my beloved my love-song concerning his vineyard: My beloved ... planted it with choice vines; he built a watchtower in the midst of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it." (Isaiah 5:1-21) In Isaiah's allegory, the beloved stood for God and the vineyard was Israel. Everybody knew this as surely as you and I would know the allegorical reference of donkeys and elephants. In Jesus' allegory, the landowner does everything the beloved does. Plants, fences, builds a wine press, constructs a watchtower to guard against attacks and intruders. Then the landowner leases the property to tenants, with an agreement that he gets a share of the produce at harvest time. The landowner then went to another country.

At the time of harvest, the landowner sends servants to the vineyard to collect his produce. "But the tenants seized his slaves and beat one, killed another, and stoned another..." (Matthew 21:35) Why? Jesus doesn't say. Instead, when the landowner hears what happened, he did a crazy thing. He sends more of his servants back to the vineyard. And the same thing happens to those servants. They were beaten, killed, and stoned. Then the landowner does a crazy thing. He wants this to work out. He is almost desperate for things to be right. So "... he sent his son to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.' But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, 'This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance.'" (Matthew 21:37-38) And that is exactly what they do.

You don't have to be very good at interpreting allegories to figure out what is going on. God is the landowner and the vineyard is Israel. The people who have leased the vineyard are the religious authorities, the ones who are upset with Jesus. The wicked tenants are the Pharisees and scribes, the chief priests, and elders. When God sent his servants, the prophets, they were beaten, stoned, and killed. God responds by sending more prophets and these wicked tenants did the same thing to them. Then Jesus, anticipating his death later in the week, looks them in the eye and says, "the landowner sent his son and they killed him." What do you think the landowner should do?²

The chief priest and the elders aren't very good at figuring out allegories. Because they answer: "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" (Matthew 21:33) Jesus waits for a moment and then, he finishes the parable just the way Nathan did. He says, "you are the man." You and you and you. You are them, those miserable wretches and now "...the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom" (Matthew 21:43)

Only then did they realize that Jesus was speaking about them. But they did not respond the way David did. They didn't confess and pray that God would wash them of their iniquity and cleanse their sin. They did not appreciate the allegory or even agree with it. They would have arrested him on the spot but they knew the crowd regarded him as a prophet. So they began to discuss actions that would lead to the ending of the parable, the death of the son of the crazy landowner.

It is a crazy story when you think about it. It's crazy for the tenants to believe that rejecting everyone will get them the vineyard. But it is not as crazy as the landowner who keeps sending casualties to the vineyard. This crazy landlord is so desperate to be in a relationship with these people that

he will do anything, risk everything, to connect with them. This landowner acts more like a desperate parent than he does a businessman, willing to do or say or try anything to reach a beloved and wayward child. It's crazy, the kind of crazy that comes from being in love.³

"What will the landlord do when he comes?" Jesus asks and all they can imagine is violence. "He will put those wretches to a miserable death." Notice that it is the chief priests and Pharisees who offer this answer. They condemn themselves.

But the allegory invites us to consider another question, not what *will* the landlord do but, what *did* the landlord do? And to that question, we have Jesus' answer. The landowner sent his son back, again. Even though we killed him, we rejected him, God raised him from the dead and sent him back to us yet again, still bearing the message of God's desperate, crazy love. Indeed "the stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord's doing, and it is amazing in our eyes." (Matthew 21:42c) Amazing? No, it's crazy, the crazy love of God for us.

God so loved us that He sent His son, love offered not once, not twice but millions and millions of times more, offered when God's children meet and receive him. He comes to us when two or more are gathered, comes in the breaking of bread, and then comes again. On this world communion Sunday, hundreds of millions, from every part of the world, gather as children in God's vineyard. There are people from Africa, Asian, Europe, Australia, North, and South America celebrating the crazy landowner's love. They gather with us at the Lord's table, feasting on the bread of life and drinking the cup of the new covenant. And mysteriously he is present. Jesus comes again, to them and us, to every child, woman and man, comes to say, you are the man, you are the man, you are the woman, you and you, you. Now, take, eat, drink, and experience my love and grace.

If that's not crazy, I don't know what is, the crazy love of our landowner God who will not stay away. But it's not just crazy, it is the greatest truth of the world, a truth to live by, a hope to die by, and promise which lives eternally. Thank you, God for sending your son to this vineyard and to us, again and again.

¹ Somerville, Jim. "Dirty Rotten Scandals." October 18, 2017. The form of this sermon is influenced by this sermon. Retrieved @ <https://asermonforeverysunday.com>

² Somerville, Jim.

³ <http://www.davidlose.net/2014/09/pentecost-17a-crazy-love/>