

S. Pentecost 18.17 “Marvelous In Our Eyes” Matt. 21:33-46

This has been a tricky one, this parable, for readers of the Story over the years. Johnny still struggles with his reading, you see, even after all these years, and with his other issues. Television, contrary to popular belief, does not seem to be helping. The story itself is not *too* difficult, really. Jesus has been telling a bunch of His little stories (very Jorge Luis Borges in their brevity and bizarreness, many of them!). That first line: “hear another parable” has some of the snark we heard last week, still in it, like: “Since you’ve liked the other ones so much, have another.” Because they *haven’t* liked the little stories, at *all*. Not many Borges fans then or now...

But this one is pretty straightforward. A certain landowner has a vineyard, with a nice hedge, winepress, and tower. The landowner leases it to tenant farmers and went into a far country (this landowner is always going on trips, usually to some far country. Think: in what way might Jesus, at this point in the Story [near the End!] be like the landowner? Is *He* going anywhere? Is it very far?).

Now, when vintage-time drew near, the landowner sends servants to get a little taste of it, maybe he also sends food, makes a real *Feast* for his servants? But the vinedressers are having none of it. They’ve been managing things themselves, and have become proprietary. They think “we built that!” and have rather forgotten how things actually stand with them, the landowner, and the vineyard they occupy by his good grace. So they took the servants of the real landowner, beat one, killed one, and stoned another—with *rocks*, we must (sadly!) now point out, not with Colorado’s state crop. It wasn’t *that* kind of a party...

Now, here’s the part that is a little Borges, a little strange. This landowner is clearly a smart guy, and yet he doesn’t seem to adjust his expectations very much, so his servants keep getting beaten, killed, or stoned [you know what I mean]. That’s weird. How long does it take this guy to get the message that these tenants are *mean*? Or is suffering at the hands of his own squatters maybe part of some much *stranger* plan of the Landowner’s? Contemplate that, because I think it explains a lot at the End...

Anyway, where were we? Oh, yes! A bunch of servants, beaten, killed, *stoned*. And yet while “Jimmy is starting to get a little upset!” the landowner is *not*. He seems oddly calm, cool, and collected—as concerned for these rotten squatters as for His loyal servants, which does seem more than a little *odd*. He comes up with an idea that seems very unpromising indeed: He sends them his son, saying: “They will respect my son.” *Will* they?

Well, they *do*, but in a very odd way. They recognize the son, realize this is the sole heir of the landowner, and go “Hey! This is the heir. Come, let us *kill* him and seize his inheritance!” This plan seems as ill-advised as the landowner’s. What court is going to award the estate to **murderers** who’ve killed the legitimate heir? Surely the murderers will go to *jail*, and the estate will go to friends or distant relatives, right? And yet, here again, one wonders if the landowner is crazy like a fox. Could this have been his plan all along—to leave the inheritance to the ones who killed his only son? It would be *very* bizarre (even for Borges), such a plan. But keep it in the back of your mind, and see if it doesn’t make some strange kind of sense in the End...

Well, they *do* kill him, the landowner’s son, those wicked tenants. And then Jesus does something very post-modern—but only in Matthew’s version of the story. He lets *you* tell the ending. At the crucial point, Jesus goes, “when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those vinedressers?” Write your own ending! And the audience shouts back, “He will destroy

those wretches, *wretchedly*” [literally, in the Greek that’s what they say, lots of wretchedness in a small space] “and lease his vineyard to others who will render to him the fruits in their seasons.”

And Jesus, very Borges-like, refers to an obscure text which the crowd should know, if they are real readers, but seem not to know because they do not factor this text into their ending at all—because the connection is really very strange indeed, and it’s not clear why any but the most advanced readers would make such a connection. It’s a little line from Psalm 118 (which was in my own reading last Friday as I was working on this, which was very Borges and cool. You are what you *read*. Clothes don’t make the man. The **Word** does!). “The stone which the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone. This is the Lord’s doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes.” Ever hear of that one, hmm? See the connection to My own Story?

The crowd stares, uncomprehending, at this, as Johnny often does when assigned a Borges story like “The Aleph” or “The Library of Babel”. A blank stare. “What are you talking about, *Jesus!*”? So, Jesus tells the epilogue to *their* ending: “Therefore I say to you, the Kingdom of God will be taken from you and given to a people bearing the fruits of it. And whoever falls on this stone will be broken; but on whomever it falls, it will grind him to powder.” A very athletic epilogue! I like it! High body count in this one. “The only thing about the Zombie Apocalypse, when it comes...”

So what do we make of this strange story? Well, Jesus likes a story with a little *action* in it, for one thing. I like that. Also the action is a little *strange*, like Borges, surprising twists, supernatural turns. The mind must expand—and the heart and the Faith(!)—to take in the Story Jesus tells! And Jesus seems to love obscure literary and musical references as the punchlines to His stories, and if only His friends get it, well that’s no bad thing, it would seem...

But *what does it mean?* Ah, well; that’s the delight of it. As Jesus leaves it to you to write the ending and then epilogues it according to the ending you give Him, so the tale He tells is clearly designed to **absorb** our world, our stories, into *His*—rather than having a neat little moral that we can fit into the stories *we* tell of ourselves. And that’s why Jesus’ Story is most certainly not for everyone. It’s an acquired taste, for advanced Story-aficionados, that not everyone acquires, but maybe *you* have it?

Unimaginative hearers will conclude: “If you are mean to Jesus and His servants, He will destroy you wretches, *wretchedly*, take your kingdom, and give it away!” But I say, “not exactly”. Like a Borges story, there’s a twist: Jesus lets *you* tell the ending, and then works with *that*. You *can* have the wretches ended wretchedly, if you like. But Jesus says the killing of the Son is the **Lord’s** doing and it is *marvelous* in our eyes!

Simply put: if Jesus’ death on the cross for your sins [after all the wrong you did Him and His servants!] is *marvelous* in your eyes, weird and wonderful, good things happening to bad people, grace abounding, forgiveness for the chief of sinners, a Story to laugh and cry over, to feast over and raise a glass to with the King, well then; it’s **your story**—and along with IT comes the Kingdom, the power, Its strange grandeur and glory—all *yours*, all *free*, at **Jesus’** expense! His Story *absorbs* your world, *transforms* it... so you can raise a glass with the King, Feast with Him, here and now, at the Table where Peace surpassing understanding guards heart and mind in Christ Jesus. Amen.