

“Humankind cannot bear too much reality.” T.S. Eliot, the brilliant Anglo-Catholic poet, said this in the opening poem of his masterwork, *The Four Quartets*: “Humankind cannot bear too much reality.” The human mind, body and spirit are not always logical or consistent, but when we encounter too much reality, especially upsetting reality, we do seem to tend toward denial, don’t we? That doesn’t make us bad or weak, just *human*. Often, our denial is how we seek the restoration of some kind of order. It’s just that restored order is not always the best outcome.

In scripture, we hear prophets, apostles and saints referring to people who have ears, but do not hear; eyes, but do not see; or who have hearts that have hardened. These same men and women have taught us that the beginning of wisdom is the acknowledgement of our denial. That’s also the starting point of 12-step recovery programs that have become among the most powerful spiritual paths available. Most recovering addicts will tell you that what they were doing did not feel like denial before they began recovery and that natural, human tendency toward denial may be why the prophets created a parable form specifically designed to elicit self-awareness; a form that works by slipping us into the story through a side-door rather than confronting us directly.

Jesus does that here: A man starts a vineyard and leases it to tenant farmers. When it comes time to collect his share of the fruit, he sends his servants, but the tenants beat them and throw them out. Finally the landlord sends his son and the tenants kill him. “What will the owner do?” Jesus asks a group of Jewish leaders, who answer from their own experience: “He will bring them to a terrible end (there’s no mention in the Greek of killing them); he will bring them to a terrible

end and lease the vineyard to other farmers who will give back to him the fruits in their seasons.”

For centuries, Christians have satisfied themselves that this parable is an allegory about God’s frustration with the Jews: God is the owner of the vineyard, Israel is the vineyard, Jews are the tenants, prophets are the various messengers, and Jesus is the son whom the tenants kill. In retribution, God takes the kingdom away from the Jews and gives it to the Christians. That’s how this passage has been preached and taught for centuries. But one of the hard—no, the horrid—realities that Christians have to face is that we allowed this passage and others like it to fuel anti-Jewish fires within our minds and hearts, culminating in the literal fires of Auschwitz-Birkenau and Belzec. That’s a lot of reality to bear, I know. But if we never consider these hard realities then we unintentionally enable each other to live, not in hope, but as addicts to blame, guilt and fear.

Fortunately, another more life-affirming path has emerged. In the years since the Shoah—that’s the appropriate name for the Holocaust, which means “sacrifice”; *shoah* means “slaughter”—in the years since the Shoah, Christian and Jewish theologians have broken through a lengthy denial to find new insights. These begin with the reframing of the passage as a prophetic critique by a Jew—Jesus—speaking to fellow Jews in the hopes of provoking Israel to repentance. Jesus starts his story by borrowing from Isaiah, a story that his Jewish audience would have recognized immediately, and so Jesus does not have to add from Isaiah 5: "For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts is the house of Israel, and the people of Judah are his pleasant planting."

Before we go any further, keep in mind that Christianity emerged during a period when God was inspiring a fertile renewal in Judaism: renewal that shaped the Pharisees’ wisdom and charity, the Sadducees’ liturgical enthusiasm, the Zealots’ deep commitment to social action and the Essenes’ mystical purity. The

people listening to Jesus' parable—the chief priests, scribes and elders—were good people who loved their religious traditions, their interpretations of holy scripture, the people in their worship community and their role in leading them. But had they come to love these more than they loved God? Or worse, had they come to love their status, their money or their power more than they loved God? Perhaps beginning to recognize that they may not be producing the fruit that God expected—hearing themselves in the story portrayed not as the righteous, but as those who were at risk of losing the kingdom of God—perhaps they were just noticing the very faint outlines of their denial of reality.

More to the point, has the parable worked this morning to make us a little more self-aware? Have we, in any way, begun to love our way of doing things, our personal interpretations of scripture or our status more than we love God? Do we ever, in any way, reject other people because we have decided that they are somehow less pious, less worthy, less valuable than we are? By our actions or inactions, do we allow our way of being Christian in the world to bring pain and suffering to others?

As we heard this morning in Isaiah's prophecy, God *destroyed* the vineyard, which is perhaps why Jesus' audience of learned, faithful people assumed that the landowner in the parable would wreak vengeance. But Jesus has added a couple of wrinkles to the Isaiah story. Isaiah's vineyard prophecy warned of a bad end for those who have rejected Torah—the teaching of God. Jesus, the cornerstone, consistently followed and preached the Torah tradition that said: "Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against anyone among your people, but love your neighbor as yourself." "Have you never read in the scriptures?" Jesus asks, as if to say, "You, of all people—the chief priests, elders and scribes—you should know that loving your neighbor as yourself is the Torah's *alternative* to a life of vengeance. So why did you answer as you did?"

Like every good prophet, Jesus was asserting that the religious *leaders* were no longer leading Israel's people in accordance with God's will—and cautioning us—to be sure that God's will is borne through us in the fruits of justice, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Jesus was insisting, not that God would reject the Jewish leaders and the Pharisees, but that if they rejected the foundational teachings, they would remove *themselves* from the coming life of the kingdom of heaven.

Keeping our minds and hearts closed ensures that one is never bothered and the other never broken. But to encounter the Risen Christ, to fall on the stone that the builders rejected and to be broken into pieces, *to be broken open, hearts and minds*—this is to be bothered out of denial and toward the God who is kind and generous toward the just and the unjust alike.

To be broken open by the Risen Christ is to be lovingly challenged into taking a fearless inventory of our rejections and abuses of others *without slipping into self-condemnation*. To be broken open by the Risen Christ is to taste the in-breaking of the kingdom of heaven in which is no need for vengeance because, in the fullness of God's time, we will forgive as God forgives us; we will show mercy as God shows mercy to us; we will love each other as Christ loves us and, as T.S. Eliot's *Four Quarters* concludes: "And all shall be well and all manner of thing shall be well."