

Paul, in his letter to the church at Philippi, carefully lays out his credentials. Now, our lectionary starts halfway through a verse. What Paul says is, “I *do* have confidence in the flesh. If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more.” Paul’s use of the word “flesh” here refers to his physical identity, family membership and religious ancestry

The double emphasis matters. Paul is saying, “I am a qualified expert on Jewish teaching. I seriously and truly know what I’m talking about.” He has confidence in his human experience as a loyal Jew by race, religion and temperament. As a Jewish Pharisee, Paul is a Greek-educated scholar of Hebrew scripture, theology and Mosaic law. It’s the first century equivalent of saying, “Listen, I don’t just know about the law, I’m a Harvard grad” or “I have an engineering master’s from MIT.”

This is the man who has been awestruck by the resurrection of Christ. As a Pharisee, Paul expected God to start the resurrection at the end of time. But now, within his own lifetime, God has acted in an unanticipated way in the middle of time.

The end times, for Paul, have begun. And so, his training, his status, even his identity have all now served their purpose. Because of his encounter with the Risen Christ, Paul has forfeited all his privileges and status and now regards them as...well, the word we heard was “rubbish.” The Greek word is a little cruder, but we can go with “excrement” for now. Think of it as whatever is left after nutrition has come to the end of its usefulness.

Paul *never* rejects Judaism or claims that Judaism is no longer necessary. What has Paul overjoyed is his clarity that, with the resurrection of Christ, God has opened the doorway to the age to come. There is no longer a need for any barrier between Jew and Gentile.

He has released his attachment to any past accomplishments. In the light of this new development, he considers them expendable and sets all that aside so that he can be found in Christ. Forgetting what lies behind, Paul is now “stretched out in longing” toward what lies ahead; yearning for the fullness of Christ’s future that is already emerging in the present.

While he was still Saul, what formed his identity was Pharisaic Judaism, Roman law and Greek rational wisdom. Then Christ laid hold of

him and made Paul his own. So, Paul responds in love as a *new creature*. Instead of either clinging to or rejecting his past, Saul took on a new identity as Paul, an adoptive son of God.

Paul saw that there were some people *chosen* as covenant people because God gave them Torah and they try to keep it. And there are others who have *become* members of God's covenant people because of what the Messiah of Israel has done, which was to be obedient, even unto death.

That same new reality is what Matthew's Jesus is describing.

In the second of three parables, Jesus speaks to the chief priests and elders of the temple who have become fixated on who is authoritatively correct. Now, despite our history of misinterpretation, the point of these parables has *never* been that Christianity is more correct than Judaism.

What both Paul and Jesus are speaking to is the distinction between trust and distrust. They are drawing contrasts between how God acts in the world and how humans act.

In the aftermath of still more unexplainable and horrific violence last week, the viciousness in this grim parable may hold our attention. Maybe last week has tenderized us enough to hear and to pass along what is inclusive and uplifting and life-affirming in these stories as the evidence of our faith in Christ.

Last week, Jesus told a parable that emphasized the importance of allowing God to change our minds; learning to soften our trust in our own perspectives so that God can expose us to deeper, more inclusive truth. This week, before anyone interrupts, Jesus continues: "Listen to another parable."

And then, just like Paul did in his letter, Jesus starts with a double emphasis that our reading leaves out. He says: "There was a man, the master of a household..." Not "God is like..." or even "heaven is like..." but "there was a man, the master of a household..."

You see, we get used to taking the main character of scriptural parables to always represent God. But what if Matthew's Jesus is using this double emphasis to interrupt our habitual pattern of listening? That is to say, what if Jesus wants us to start with the possibility that this particular character may be a just a human and *not* God?

Jesus starts his story with an image that his Jewish audience would have recognized immediately from Isaiah that read: "For the vineyard of the

LORD of hosts is the house of Israel, and the people of Judah are his pleasant planting."

Now, up until the past couple of decades, Christians have taught that the tenants represented the Jews who killed prophets, represented by the slaves in the parable. We taught that those same Jews also killed Jesus, who is the son. God, we said, was the master who condemns and destroys the Jews and then gives the vineyard, presumably the realm of heaven, to the Gentiles who will be the new tenants.

But with only the slightest probing that interpretation breaks into pieces. Remember, the image of the *vineyard* represents *Israel*. The *vines* represent the *people* of God's covenant. In the parable, the vineyard and the vines are doing just fine and are producing fruit. In other words, the Jewish *people* are doing their part in trying to keep the teachings that God gave them.

Jesus is talking to a group of priests and defenders of the status quo. They are social elites cooperating with Roman authorities and claiming the authority of their birth, and social and economic position. *They*, not the Jewish people, are the tenants in the parable who are acting with violence.

The parable also presents the character of a lord who acts with unimaginable generosity. After the death of several servants, he risks even his own son. And when they murder his beloved son, Jesus asks a question: "When the lord of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those care-takers?"

And then, as we all so often do, the temple priests and elders quickly turn to their untrusting imaginations and habitual self-interests. "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."

And in the blindness of their distrust, they cut *themselves* off from the covenant that they were charged with serving. The only reaction they could imagine was more violence – a far more human act than a holy one.

In truth, the Divine LORD acted remarkably differently. God sent Jesus, the son, to usher in the realm of heaven. To be the stone that broke down all other human empires in preparation for God the coming of God's heavenly realm. And when we killed Jesus, God raised him from the dead.

Even our murder of Jesus, the son, did not provoke God into vengeful retribution. Rather than returning Divine violence for human violence, through

the cross of Jesus, God absorbed our violence and sent the Risen Christ back with a message: “Peace be with you!”

The Risen Son remains deeply faithful to saving the children of Israel. His death on the cross is evidence of his faithfulness to God’s promise. Through his death and resurrection, you and I are given new identities, like Paul. We are vines grafted through the Spirit into the vineyard of Israel.

We share in the faith that is *in Christ* because we, too, are *in Christ*. Any righteousness we have comes from God through the faith that is in Christ. Holiness has nothing to do with our parents or our background or our moral purity.

St. Thérèse of Lisieux said that we know God by participating in God, not by trying to please God from afar.

The way we share in the righteousness of the faith belonging to Jesus Christ is to trust and to be true. Turning toward God is how we open ourselves to God’s gifts of compassion, mercy and forgiveness. God gives these to make all the trusting children of Israel into the light of creation.

And if we trust and truly follow Christ, God can use us to show the world that hatred and divisiveness and death *can* and *will* be overcome by love and forgiveness and life eternal.

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