

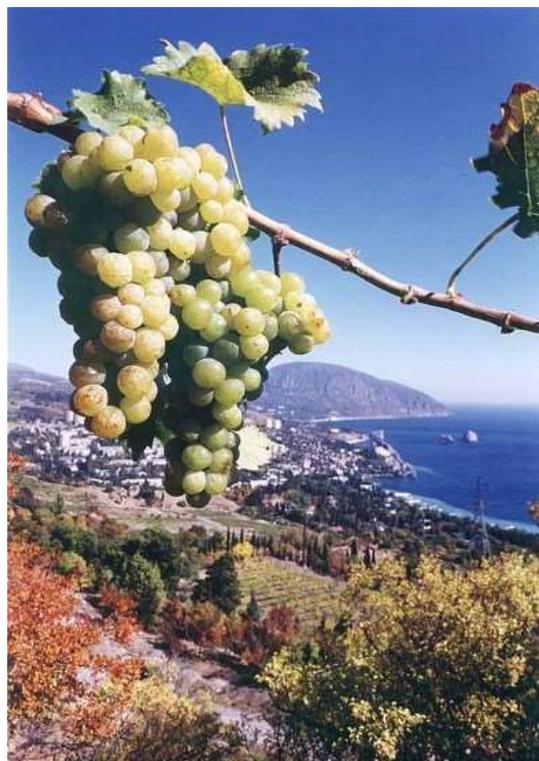
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Sermons

from The Church of the Covenant

“Hostility”

The Reverend Amy Starr Redwine



The Church of the Covenant
Presbyterian Church (USA)
11205 Euclid Avenue
Cleveland, Ohio 44106
CovenantWeb.org

Matthew 21:33–46

33 *"Listen to another parable. There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a wine press in it, and built a watchtower. Then he leased it to tenants and went to another country. 34 When the harvest time had come, he sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his produce. 35 But the tenants seized his slaves and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. 36 Again he sent other slaves, more than the first; and they treated them in the same way. 37 Finally he sent his son to them, saying, "They will respect my son." 38 But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, "This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance." 39 So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him. 40 Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?" 41 They said to him, "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." 42 Jesus said to them, "Have you never read in the scriptures: "The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord's doing, and it is amazing in our eyes"? 43 Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom. 44 The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls." 45 When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they realized that he was speaking about them. 46 They wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowds, because they regarded him as a prophet.*

"Hostility" **Matthew 21:33-46**

The great preacher George Buttrick was once on an airplane headed home from a conference. During the flight he pulled out a notepad to work on Sunday's sermon. After a few minutes the man sitting next to him spoke. "I'm sorry to interrupt you," he said, "I can see how hard you're working there and I just have to ask: what are you doing?"

"I'm a minister," Buttrick replied, "and I'm writing my sermon for Sunday."

"Ah, religion," said the man. "I can't say I'm much into the complexities of religion myself. 'Do unto others as you would have them do unto you'--the Golden Rule. That's about all the religion I need."

"I see," said Buttrick. "And what do you do?"

"I'm an astronomy professor," said the man. "I teach at the university."

"Ah, astronomy," said Buttrick. "I can't say I know much about the complexities of astronomy. 'Twinkle, twinkle little star'--that's about all the astronomy I need."¹

There's another pastor-on-an-airplane story, this one with David Lose, who struck up a conversation with his seat mate. Eventually, the conversation turned to church and Lose asked the man, "So, do *you* go to church?"

"Funny you should ask," the man replied. "My family and I just made a decision about church." He went on to explain that the previous year, they had let themselves get over-extended. Between work, social commitments, and all the activities of their two children -- one in elementary school and one in middle school -- they were completely exhausted by Christmas. So much so, that they were determined that this year would be different.

So one Sunday after church, they held a family meeting to review all their commitments in light of how each one helped them to be the individuals and family they wanted to be. After an hour and a half they made their decision: they decided to stop "doing" church. Girl Scouts was in, but church was out.

"It's just not that meaningful," the man explained. "We go each week and finally realized we're not getting anything out of it. It doesn't connect with the rest of our lives, let alone help us lead those lives. So we're done. We're not doing church anymore."²

¹ Heard in a sermon by Thomas Long on Mark 4, "Deeper." Online version: <http://castroller.com/podcasts/CenterForExcellence/1296179>.

² David Lose, "Dear Working Preacher," May 9, 2010, http://www.workingpreacher.org/dear_wp.aspx?article_id=342.

A few weeks ago, the Archbishop of Canterbury, also known as Justin Welby, admitted to a church congregation that there have been times when he has wondered whether there really is a God. Dig a little deeper into Welby's life and what's really amazing is that he believes in God at all: as a teenager he cared for his alcoholic father, and as an adult, he lost a 7 month-old baby daughter in a car accident. What normal human being wouldn't have some moments of darkness and doubt in those circumstances?

But many found in Welby's comments cause for celebration, and not because they admired the strength of his faith in the face of such suffering. They were celebrating something entirely different. After Welby's admission of doubt became public, a Muslim scholar tweeted, "I cannot believe this," and an Australian columnist who is a self-proclaimed atheist tweeted, "VICTORY!"³

What do we do when we encounter people whose reaction to our faith is,
at best, indifference or resistance and,
at worst, open hostility?

What do we do when someone opposes the faith we hold so dear?

Over the last few weeks, we have been patiently working our way through a section of the gospel of Matthew in which each parable Jesus tells is more difficult than the last. Today's parable has the distinction of not just being a parable, but also a kind of allegory for the entire gospel story.

In this allegory, God is the landowner, who lovingly prepares a beautiful vineyard and then hires tenants to care for it. The tenants of that vineyard represent those people who refuse to follow God's ways — in the parable, they beat, maim, and kill the servants of the landowner who come to collect the rightful share of the vineyard's produce. These servants represent the prophets of the Hebrew Bible, sent to call the people to acknowledge their sinfulness and change their ways. Jesus is represented by the landowner's son, whom the landlord sends in a last-ditch attempt to try and talk sense into the tenants. But it is futile: in their twisted logic the tenants somehow believe that if they can get rid of their landlord's son the vineyard will become theirs. And so they kill the son too.

Our God knows exactly what it's like when genuine love and faith are met with ridicule, resistance, and even violence.

At some point in our lives, we have all personally experienced this, whether we consider ourselves deeply religious or more, say, religiously curious. It might not

³ Julia Baird, "Doubt as a Sign of Faith." *The New York Times*, Sept. 25, 2014.

always be someone who is openly hostile to our beliefs or practices or curiosities, and fortunately most of us here aren't so high-profile that if we admitted to doubt someone else would tweet about it. But we've probably all had a friend or family member who rolled their eyes when we talk about God. Maybe there's a coworker who gets annoyed when we bring our faith-based ethics into the workplace. Or maybe we've had to contend with a coach who has threatened to kick our kids off the team if we miss the Sunday morning game because of church.

No matter what kind of personal resistance to faith that we might have encountered, there is simply no escaping, for any of us, that the place of religion in our culture isn't what it used to be.

And from where we sit in the declining mainline church, it can feel like this particular way of religion is slowly eroding. The church is no longer a protected realm of society and culture as it was for centuries when faith was an accepted and even expected part of life. Believing in God and living out that belief as part of a faith community has become for most people simply one option among many as we seek to build meaningful, moral lives.

So what do we do with that? How do we live out our faith in a world that is, at best, indifferent and resistant, and, at worst, openly hostile? How do we share our faith with a world that doesn't want to hear about it or take it seriously?

This is a community where we take our faith seriously. Almost all of us have stories of times that were both painful and powerful in the ways they changed our understanding of God and ourselves. Most of us are not afraid to admit to doubt and even see doubt as an integral part of faith. We study the Bible but we don't expect or accept easy answers. And even though we may not be comfortable with the word "evangelism," we long to talk about our faith in ways that other people would understand and appreciate. Because we don't just want to keep it to ourselves. We want others to experience the incredible, unstoppable, unconditional love of God that we have known. We want people to know what it's like, even for the briefest of moments, to glimpse the transcendent, to brush up against eternity, to know God's acceptance and love.

In this parable, Jesus is making a point about how the religious leaders of his day were responding to his claim that God's love was for everyone, even those previously thought to be outside the pale of God's forgiveness. Jesus was proclaiming in word and action that God's love is for the whole world. And those who were in charge — those who had the most to lose in this — didn't want to hear it.

This story about the landowner and the tenants reflected a typical arrangement in Roman-occupied Palestine. While a landowner lived or worked somewhere else, his tenants would tend the land. In return they got a place to live and a portion of whatever the land produced. It was a fair arrangement, but in the story Jesus tells, there is a strange and unexpected twist: the landowner doesn't behave the way a wise landowner should.

Any landowner thinking clearly would have kicked the ungrateful tenants off his land the minute they refused to hand over his rightful share of the produce. Instead, when the tenants beat, maim and kill the first set of servants, the landowner sends more servants. And when they do the same thing to them, he makes the inexplicable and ill-advised decision to send his own son.

After telling this parable to the religious leaders, Jesus asks them to supply the ending: "When the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?" Their 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."

Notice it is not Jesus who supplies this answer; it is the religious leaders themselves, the ones who have been so resistant and hostile to Jesus' words and deeds. They give the expected answer, at least in human terms: 99 out of 100 human landowners would do what the religious leaders predict and avenge the brutal murder of their sons.

But the gospel isn't a story about how human beings respond to hostility. It's a story about how God responds to humanity — to indifference, resistance, hostility, and even violence. And time and time again God responds foolishly, recklessly, inexplicably, and ill-advisedly. In the face of resistance and hostility, God responds with love. God refuses to let violence and death have the last word. God chooses love.

On the last night of his life, speaking to his dearest friends, Jesus tells them, "If the world hates you, be aware that it hated me before it hated you...if they persecuted me, they will persecute you." (John 16: 18-20)

Confronting resistance and hostility has always been part of what it means to be Jesus' disciples. Following him means that friends will question you, family members will test you, and co-workers will think you're a little off. But resistance and hostility never have the last word.

That same night, Jesus also commands his disciples to love on another as he loved them. “No one has greater love than this,” he says, “to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.” The last word is always love. God always chooses love.

It was the early 1990s, and the country of Yugoslavia was embroiled in civil war. Serb nationalists had laid siege to Sarajevo, and life in the city had become an ordeal of trying to find food and water amid shelling and sniper fire that killed many civilians.

On May 27, 1992, a line of people had formed outside one of the last open bakeries as people waited to buy bread. A mortar shell fell right into the middle of the line, killing 22 people. A man named Vedran Smajlovic lived nearby and came to help those wounded in the attack. He was heartbroken by what he saw. He felt powerless. He was not a politician or a soldier, he was a musician: the principal cellist of the Sarajevo Opera. As he processed his experience of the attack he decided the only thing he could do was play his music.

The next day, he took his cello to the spot where the people waiting for bread had been killed. Dressed in concert attire of formal black tails, he sat down on top the rubble, took up his cello, and began to play. In spite of the danger, a crowd formed to listen to him. Afterward, they told him, “[Your music] is exactly what we needed.

Smajlovic went back to that spot for 22 days and played his cello, a day for each person killed in the attack. In spite of sniper fire and mortars falling around him, he kept playing. Then he went to other sites where Sarajevo’s citizens had been killed and played there. In the face of terrible hostility and violence, he offered the gift of his music to those trying to understand how such hatred could exist in the world.⁴

What do we do in the face of indifference, resistance, or hostility? We do what God does. As the choir will sing in just a few minutes, “For God so loved the world...God so loved the world...”

We do what God does. We choose kindness over anger, forgiveness over resentment, reaching out over turning away. We do what Jesus told us to do: we love one another. Again and again, we choose love. Amen.

⁴ <http://www.readthespirit.com/explore/vedran-smajlovic-celist-of-sarajevo-still-moves-the-world/>



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