

## THE OPEN TENT

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Grace Church in New York  
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*“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.” (Matthew 21:33)*

The morning was not a promising one for the pending wedding celebration to take place that very evening. This was a strange September morning in the usual mild Atlanta piedmont. The air was chilly, the kind of chill who makes the spirit slump and hunker down. I spent the morning looking for a sweater and considering how I might pull off the dress I brought with the borrowed evergreen fleece I had borrowed. Sitting there waiting on that gray and peevish Sunday morning (maybe I just felt peevish) ... even so, if a day could be given personality, the day was a cranky one. All the while, I regretted for my dear friend the perfect outdoor wedding evening she had so long imagined and constructed in her mind's eye, and had not yet been given form.

Yet, as the day progressed, as oftentimes in life, and as her mother articulated this past week on the phone, the 'stars aligned' and the grim fog blew gently away and the sun burned his way through the disconsolate murk – the grumpy day – and ushered in a wide breadth of an evening, warm, welcoming, and serene. The afternoon time had swiftly moved one season to the next. Miraculous, really, the disparaging day let out its border, releasing itself into the arms of a gentle, inviting evening. I wore cap sleeves with confidence and freedom, sitting back to relish the celebration, much anticipated.

My friend and her husband to be stood below the chuppah, a canopy above them lifted by four posts grounded deep in the earth that stood below. They stood looking at one another, I may only imagine, remembering the ketubah, the marriage contract they had just signed, promising to be an obligation to one another, the kind of obligation that is in the flesh – human being – “made in our [God's] likeness” the Genesis text proclaims. We all watched the two of them in that covered and sacred space, and the vision was not so much penned down or fenced in, the bride's father's thallit – or prayer shawl – was their cover and it blew in the light breeze above them, the ties drawn to each of the posts, danced and spinned in the evening's breath, echoing the seven circles the bride and groom would soon make in fellowship with one another.

The four sides of the chuppah tent were windows to the land all around this new family becoming. The trees and their many beautiful parts – leaves, branches, even the groan of the trunk, bent and danced in communion with these two beloved children of the light, these children of God. The boundless sky above and the fellowship of trees, not to mention the company of human creation, fanned and stretched out, without end.

As we watched the service unfold, I meditated on my love for this pair. How their lives had become intermingled with mine. I, a stranger, and they, new friends, who included me in their lives. Whether it was a yoga outing, a supper club, a Friday Rock Shabbat service, a dinner out, or the first time I had been invited into a family's home for a meal. My first year in a foreign city, for all intents and purposes, and the bride's mother and her father invited me to my first ever Passover meal. Her father, now sadly passed from this mortal life since that Passover meal, had dressed up as Moses and retold the story of the children of God being brought out of a

land of enslavement and into the good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey. I always give thanks for the Moses and his family who reached out and drew me in, making me one with them, dining with me, and loving me, as we were made to do.

I also meditated on their future life together, this bride and groom, and whether there might be a daughter or a son to come. I hoped for them all their hearts' desire. I knew with this family they would, as I had known, in my own flesh, they would not hunker down to be solipsistic in their living, but would extend themselves outward to a family, greater than even their biology required. That chuppah expressed their willingness to be open to the life that might form around them. Who would they welcome in their tent? How might they send themselves out? Certainly, they would often return to one another for strength and nourishment, but always, they would be walking out to the edge of their property, so to speak, and wondering about what lie, in abundance, in that land flowing with milk and honey. Beloved bride and groom, below that humble tent, turned to us all and expressed without word, their gratitude for our presence present and offered us their home. The marriage celebration's program concurred "The four sides of the chuppah are open, recalling the tent of Abraham and Sarah, ... always open to visitors. That was their commission to us. "You are welcome." So, this family's tent remained a sign in my memory of the land those blessed two would tend together. Ah! And what a burgeoning and glorious garden/ territory/ land this promised to be. This would be the place where God's bounty would be animated and stretch out. Yes, in the life of these two ... and, my, would it grow!

And perhaps by now you have considered that I may be avoiding this very challenging and haunting parable from the Gospel of Matthew. Of course, the text did first intimidate, especially being the first text from which to preach in this great and awesome space. Yet, Jesus, so marvelously, has been telling these parables for some weeks now, accessing this picture of land and its owner and those asked to care for this landscape. Yes, perhaps, we might neatly ascertain the meaning behind this story Jesus tells of the wicked tenants. We'll do that. Yes. Then, we'll walk out on this land a little further, and do exactly what Matthew's author and Jesus, in his telling, probably hoped for us, his listeners. New Testament scholar N.T. Wright helps unpack the parable a bit. The whole story, Wright explains, *"is Jesus' way (or Jesus' gospeler's way) of explaining what was going on then and there. .... It is the perspective on the way events he was involved in – rejected by those he had come to ... The vineyard owner is of course God; the vineyard is Israel; the farmers are [officials, both religious and political], and the slaves are earlier prophets, ending with John the Baptist. The Son can only be Jesus himself."*

As we all hear this Gospel, we with our able minds, may clearly know who the players are in this stark and seemingly hidden parable. Not so much, though, is hidden. Matthew's author is writing about what he knows has happened. He has written the text after the fact of Jesus' ministry, betrayal, and death. Jesus speaks this parable, because, as the author of the gospels endows him, he knows what is coming and is teaching this lesson to awaken the listeners to the story, in the now. Yet, as gospels go and as they are proclaimed in public spaces, such as this one, we are called to listen, yet again, and hear what the spirit is saying to God's people! This parable is for us, and, perhaps, yes, for us to understand again what has happened in the past, but more so, as I imagine Jesus might have hoped, for those with ears to hear –to listen, to envision this leased land for ourselves ... now.

Where does the landscape of family begin? In this parable, all we know is there is a father, his land, those entrusted to care for the land, and his son. One might only assume that those esteemed with the call to care for the land would certainly care also for the very beloved of this landowner. Even as we might hear from the parable's text, the landowner and father – from

beginning to end – extends trust, extends welcome, extends himself. Yet the caretakers value not this overture, this sign of hospitality. These caretakers abide not in the life of that land. Have they any idea who the owner was – generous, extending mercy, offering relationship, even by way of his own child. By the end of the parable, I get hung up on the tragic reality of these tenants, so isolated, protective, combative, suspicious, fearful, and scared.

Of what are they scared? This landowner had given them allowance and freedom to do as they pleased. The tent was open. And from the servants to his very son, the tenants take the fence and exact a gruesome and divisive wall. Whatever sense of honor the landowner hoped his land's caretaker's were capable, these were, most certainly, dashed. The landowner must have powerlessly clutched at his pained body and asked "how could this be? What has happened? What am I to do ... now? How will I respond ... now?"

This parable sounds much like the world in which we live and know only all too well. Thoughtless, violent death happens ... without ceasing ... in a world, and even on a smaller scale, in the most intimate of relationships – on an instinctual, and gut level. We know and expect division and conflict. "I'm right and you're wrong. ... They're wrong. We're right. They don't belong. We do. The line is here. This is ours." (I know it sounds like brother and sister in the back seat of your parents' station wagon – battling back seat territory). Scary but true, our divisions- even now in "grown up" time – are these. The land is uprooted and plowed with estrangement. Yet in the land who is God's very reign amongst us, the ties whip to and fro, claiming that the sides of this place are open.

The parable of the "wicked" tenants rests not alone but is set in the midst of the whole gospel's landscape. The land looks something like – Jesus demands for reconciliation in relationships, declaring, "You have heard it said ... you shall not murder ... but I say to you if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment, again declares "Love your enemy," "Have compassion," and delivers very practical and, demanding much responsibility, "Truly I tell you, just as you did not do to one of the least of these, you did not do to me." "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?" When, Lord? The claim and commission pushes us out from this parable and most definitely in the here and now. The son's death – Jesus' own mortal death – build up in us this seed planted, the seed like a mustard seed, growing like a wild reality – one seemingly impossible – is truly of God's very own sowing in us –

Real in so many ways – Martin Luther King Jr. preached, *[The words of Jesus show him to be an impractical idealist who never quite came down to earth. ... But far from being an impractical idealist, Jesus has become the practical realist. The words of the text glitter in our eyes with a new urgency. Far from being the pious injection of a utopian dreamer, these commands are absolute necessity for the survival of our civilization. Yes, it is love that will save our world and our civilization, love even for enemies.]* Love even for the wicked tenants. Extremely difficult. Yes. The transformation ... the turning over of this land ... this landowner delivers to our care. We make the choice how we will care for this land who is God's – God's reign on this earth.

I'm not sure any of you have seen this marvelous advertisement from Manhattan Mini Storage on the New York subway – quoting Jesus from John's gospel " 'In my Father's house are many rooms.' ... Clearly Jesus was not a New Yorker." That puts a big smile on my face. Brilliant really the countercultural reality Jesus proclaims right there, back to back – in tension with one another ... and having just added two new dead bolts to my studio apartment's door, I know the image of the open tent and land extending sounds a bit obtuse – unreasonable really. But, God's reign in small and sure ways, digs in like a good mustard seed and will not be dug up!

And nicely enough, an observation helped the truth proclaimed about land and those taking good care – just as I admired that simple signage.

A woman with a young daughter, a gentlemen with two daughters - one with a horrific croup cough - sat across from one another. The mother of the one daughter took out of her bag a bottle of water. “This might help. It’s brand new. Never been opened.” (Funny – how she anticipated a potential refusal based on risk.) And the father accepted her offer, this water. His very small and disabled by coughing daughter gulped down that water with abandon. And, of course, one might imagine and was the case with many – including me – we first sat open eyed in horror at the ‘offensive’ cough ... then, we were silenced by the smallest act of kindness, an open tent – welcoming. Ways of welcome, so many and really wondrous, and how they might take shape in our lives, how we choose to be shelter for others – signs of God’s territory. When, Lord?

In chorus, theologians Mark McIntosh and C.S. Lewis bid us “*remember that the someone next to us on the bus [on the subway] may be a benign if unknown quantity, but in the context of God’s story, the person next to us is a brother or sister for whom Christ lived ... [and as this morning’s parable asserts] died ... “it is with awe and circumspection ... that we should conduct all our dealings with one another ... There are no ordinary people.”* All are extraordinary. All arrive when we least expect it. When, Lord?

Are our tents’ sides open? Do we welcome others to a generous feast, offer welcome in the seemingly smallest of things – an encouragement, a gentle act, a moment of patience, a glass of water? All these are signs of God’s land, signs of God’s land. The ties from the thallit, the prayer shawl – the sheet is stretched out over the four posts. All is open – and the trees and sky become still sky and, now, pavement and skyscrapers and park benches and subway platforms. The Kingdom of God, the Reign of God is come very near you.

The parable is for our hearing, now. We are the tenants, we are entrusted with this significant soil. The land we tend – the family we grow – is our mission. We are the tenants. We await the son’s arrival. *Listen to another parable. There was a landowner who planted a vineyard ... Then he leased it to tenants and went to another country.*