



**St. Andrew's By-the-Sea**

*The Episcopal Church  
in Destin, Florida*

**THE NINETEENTH  
SUNDAY AFTER  
PENTECOST  
OCTOBER 8, 2023**

**A Homily by the Rev. James J. Popham**

The reading from the Gospel according to Matthew this morning speaks to the time Jesus walked the earth. It speaks to the time when it was written when the church was forming in the latter few decades of the first century. It speaks to us today.

And notwithstanding our previous observation that the beauty of parables comes from their multiplicity of interpretations, this parable from Jesus about the landowner and the tenants was an allegory that had a clear and pointed meaning that the chief priests and Pharisees and the Jewish community in the first century easily could understand.

In the parable, the landowner is God. The tenants are the people of Israel. The slaves the landowner sent are the prophets. The son of the landowner is Jesus.

The chief priests and the Pharisees knew exactly what Jesus was saying. The Israelites rejected the prophets. And their leaders would kill Jesus. Which is exactly what the chief priests and the Pharisees wanted to do. But now Jesus was pronouncing judgment upon them. The Temple had been corrupted. Once chosen to reveal the one true God to humanity, which they had done quite well, their leaders had lost their inheritance. They would be supplanted by the followers of Jesus.

The Gospel according to Matthew was written in the latter decades of the first century. What I have called a theological food fight was well underway between the Jews of those who chose to follow Jesus and those who remained faithful to the Jewish religion. They would have understood the parable, too. Their religious legacy would be overtaken by the followers of Christ, who had been rejected by their ancestors.

Catherine Booth, who co-founded the Salvation Army with her husband William Booth and was known as the Mother of the Salvation Army, once said, "There is no improving the future without disturbing the present." Dare we say that Jesus very much and very intentionally disturbed the present in the parable of the tenants.

Disturbing the present rarely has been a popular enterprise. The lucky prophets were ignored or marginalized. The less fortunate were killed, as, of course, was Jesus. Yet, even Pope Francis has observed that “we need to understand that there is an appropriate evolution in the understanding of matters of faith and morals.”<sup>1</sup>

And yet blind, clinging resistance to change is eminently human. Why is that? Why do we cling to the present and resent anyone who disturbs it? What is it about change that is troublesome? Why do we resist Jesus when he clearly is out to disturb the present to improve the future?

For the Jewish religious leaders, it was the likely loss of power, prestige, and wealth. That is easy to understand, as reprehensible as it might be. For the late first century Jews, change meant a revolution of things deep in their souls.

Anyone who has converted from one religion to another might find it difficult to shed the beliefs and customs of the past even as they embrace something even more sensible, meaningful, and ultimately dear to them.

Then, of course, we make idols of so many things. And not just things. Again, some are obvious: money, success, winning, prestige, personal piety, religious observance, politicians, prejudices, celebrities, singers, actors, scientists, reporters, commentators, athletes. They don't call the television show *American Idol*, for nothing. Bishops, priests, and deacons...please, don't. Neither of us has ever walked on water or turned water to wine.

What about our political ideologies? What about religious beliefs? What about our liturgical practices and customs? What about the music?

If Jo and I had five bucks for every time someone in a church we were serving in said, “We've never done it that way,” we'd be Hawaii sipping Mai Tais on the veranda of our beachside bungalow.

And then there is the most difficult resistor to change: addiction. Now we always think of drugs and alcohol and such as addictions. But let's not delude ourselves. Think about what pushes our buttons. Think about our

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<sup>1</sup> Elise Ann Allen, “Pope warns that for some U.S. Catholics, ideology has replaced faith,” *Crux*, August 29, 2023, <https://cruxnow.com/vatican/2023/08/pope-warns-that-for-some-u-s-catholics-ideology-has-replaced-faith> (accessed October 8, 2023).

knee-jerk reactions. Think about all the times we shoot first and ask questions later.

Those reactions are the product of petty, but consequential addictions. And often they lead to petty, consequential behavior: thoughtless actions; insensitive remarks; hurt feelings. And wounded relationships.

And, sadly, many of us may be familiar with people addicted to abusive and harmful relationships. The spouses who refuse to flee because the comfort of the familiar pain and suffering is less fearsome than the uncertainty of the unknown.

We can even be addicted to good things like coffee and diet Coke. Remember what the sign in my office by the Kuerig says? "Instant human, just add coffee." If you hear Jo ask me if I have had my second cup, keep your distance. Our little addictions to coffee and chocolate and the like may not ruin our lives or our relationships, but they surely can wreck some promising, sweet moments.

Speaking of good things, too, we have known people so addicted to contemplative prayer that missing one of their three daily sessions is cause for debilitating anxiety and disruption of routines and relationships. No matter the dinner someone painstakingly prepared becomes cold and congealed, no matter how much that disappoints and diminishes the chef, we got our full 20 minutes in. Do we believe the God who calls us to love our neighbor could wait a few minutes while we ate a delicious dinner lovingly prepared for us?

Christian psychiatrist and author Gerald May in his profoundly insightful book *Addiction and Grace* calls addiction "the most powerful psychic enemy of humanity's desire for God."<sup>2</sup>

It is, he says, "the absolute enemy of human freedom, the antipathy of love."<sup>3</sup> Why do we choose not to love? Because we are addicted to something else.

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<sup>2</sup> Gerald G. May, *Addiction and Grace*, (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1988) 3.

<sup>3</sup> May 4.

May goes on:

The psychological, neurological, and spiritual dynamics of full-fledged addiction are actively at work within every human being. The same processes that are responsible for addiction to alcohol and narcotics are also responsible for addiction to ideas, work, relationships, power, moods, fantasies, and an endless desire of other things. We are all addicts in every sense of the word."<sup>4</sup>

Is it any wonder that May devotes an entire book to God's grace as the only sure antidote to addiction.<sup>5</sup>

So maybe we should ask Jesus to disturb our present to improve our future. Or at least accept that Jesus will let the chances and changes of life disrupt our present to wake us up to the ruts we are in.

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<sup>4</sup> May 3.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*