

“The victor will always be the judge, and the vanquished the accused.”
Hermann Göring, at the Nuremberg Trials

I initially had other quotes in mind that might open this piece. But these seemed unusually appropriate – not simply for the time this parable is set in, but for presumptions about the exercise of power in any time. Göring possessed great authority in 1930’s Germany. He oversaw the Reich’s planning of the coming war, for which Germany’s victory and Europe’s vanquishing was presumed. Yet, in 10 years, the situation had reversed. The victor now stood vanquished and accused. Words that may have fed Göring’s earlier ruthlessness became his epitaph.

Victors and vanquished, and reversals of those stations, dominate Jesus’ parable. There is a landowner who, for undisclosed reasons, “went away.” There are tenants, workers *on* but not owners *of* the land. There are servants of the landowner who, in dutifully carrying out the landowner’s purposes, are abused to the point of murder. When that happens again to a second group of servants, the landowner sends own his son and heir to the land.

That is when Göring’s ethic of victors and vanquished comes into play for the tenants. *Kill the heir, and the land is ours*. Possession is nine-tenths of the law, right? Wrong. By story’s end, those who claimed victory by the brute power of murdering the heir are vanquished. In the immediate context of Jesus’ telling of this parable, some religious leaders of the day hear it as indictment of their own abuses of authority. Fear holds them at bay. But only for the moment.

The impact of Jesus’ parable lingers into our time. Its story still indicts any presumption that the ability to wield power while ignoring lawful constraints on its exercise provides the right to do so. The tenants took their ability to murder the heir, not as a breach of law but a shortcut to possess the land. But their victory and possession are short-lived. As, historically, is *every* exercise of raw power acting unconstrained by law or ethics, whether the authority claimed to act in such a way is framed in political or religious rhetoric. Do you believe that? The parable urges us in that direction. It does so in the cautionary words about the tenants’ end. And it does so in the implied identity of the heir in a parable Matthew sets within days of the Cross.

For Reflection and Action:

What do you find most disturbing in this parable; most encouraging; why?

What does this parable reveal to you about God or God’s realm; how?

What calling might this parable bring to the life and witness of:

The Church Universal; Our Saviour’s ELCA?