

What's the blackest thing on Earth? The ink from a pen? The darkness of a cave miles below the earth? A batch of crude oil drilled from the ground in North Dakota? Apparently it isn't something that can naturally be found on this earth, but rather something that is artificially made. A few years ago Scientists in New York created the darkest thing on Earth, a super-black material of interconnected, light-devouring tubes made of a carbon mesh that's only one atom thick. Researchers brag that it's very good at absorbing light and very poor at reflecting it.

Now most of us would claim that black is black — how can it get any blacker? After all we don't find Midnight Black, Ninja Black or Über Black in our child's box of Crayolas. Not even in the 96- count box with the built-in sharpener. But the new super-black material created by the scientists in New York is 30 times darker than Standard Black! It absorbs 99.95 percent of all light that hits it. Put a tux jacket next to the stuff and it will look charcoal gray.

And yet, as dark as the new artificially created black can get, as we read today's gospel text, we get the impression that we are witnessing perhaps the truly blackest stuff on Earth. Of course, I'm talking about the so-called "wicked tenants," in the story Jesus shares with us this morning. Those are people very good at absorbing light, but very poor at reflecting it.

To interpret this parable, we should probably take a quick look at its scriptural context. The narrative is one of only three that appear in all of the synoptic gospels. Which suggests that there's a theme in Jesus' story that the writer felt was a key to the gospel itself: It's a virtual thumbnail view of salvation history, and Jesus' listeners should not fail at recognizing it.

Last week we heard Jesus tell the parable of two sons. His point: The worst of sinners with their change of hearts can see the kingdom even though it remains invisible to the apparently pious religious leaders. According to the Judaic culture back then, prostitutes and tax collectors were the lowest of the low. If you were

ranking sins — which those who don't understand grace always tend to do — these people would be light-absorbers, not light-reflectors. But in Jesus' story, it's the son who said he would not obey, but who had a change of heart, who's the obedient son, not the son who said he would obey, but didn't. The first son's performance trumps the second son's promise.

Today, Jesus follows that parable with another vineyard story, and opens with an explicit reference to Isaiah that the “chief priests and the Pharisees” could not fail to recognize. Jesus quotes almost verbatim Isaiah 5:2, “He dug it [a vineyard] and cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines; he built a watchtower in the midst of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it; he expected it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes.” The landowner in this case, getting a poor crop, plows the vineyard to ground. The implication is clear: When God expects fruit and doesn't get it, the results are dire.

In today's parable, Matthew mentions the issue of fruit, or produce, three times. And he's addressing an audience of religious leaders, an apparent favorite target of Jesus. He's done this before: He curses the fig tree; he challenges the authority of the Pharisees time and again; he tells the story of the two sons and tells the Pharisees that “the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of them.” He gives us the parable of a marriage feast to which guests who were invited did not want to come, offering stupid excuses for not doing so. He deftly sidesteps an attempt by the religious leaders to goad him into making a political blunder about not paying taxes.

Light-absorbers. These are religious leaders whose hearts are so black, they apparently cherished their religion more than the God of their religion, or their neighbor next door. They loved just about everything more than they loved God or their neighbor: they loved their money, their religious authority, and their political power. They were stinking hypocrites and Jesus told them so.

This morning we observe Jesus telling them another story, beginning with a prophetic reference from Isaiah. It's a story so powerful in its meaning, and so transparent in its reference, that the religious leaders want to arrest Jesus on the spot! Once again Jesus sets the tale in a vineyard. Nobody in the crowd could be mistaken that the vineyard he was talking about was the nation of Israel.

The people of Jerusalem knew full well that the Prophets, and Writings in their Scriptures, told the story of the consistent disobedience of Israel in the past, despite the repeated wooing and warnings of Yahweh. Summarizing this history, Jesus' story has the tenants of the vineyard beating, stoning, and killing the landowner's servants, just as Israel had done to the prophets God sent her. The story invites us to see these tenants as hard-core rebels.

But things get even bleaker, blacker, when the landowner sends his own son as the final emissary. Jesus is making an unmistakable self-reference to his own sonship, and is publicly predicting his execution as the next death in the line of the rejected prophets of God. Then he poses this question: "Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?" His audience responds: "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."

As I mentioned earlier, this parable is pretty dang dark, and yet it's still possible for us to glean something from it. Especially if we take a deeper look at the different kinds of people we find in today's story. New Testament scholar, Craig Blomberg believes that every main character found in the parables of Jesus has a perspective which usually conveys a message of some kind. In that light, consider the following possibilities.

First of all, the original tenants in the story maintain a point of view involving *self-interest*; a quality that's extremely light-absorbing and light-hoarding. It's quite possible to have much of the appearance and behaviors of

personal piety, and entirely miss the heart of the gospel. These tenants should inspire a personal soul-check.

Which begs us to consider the following questions: What are the motives behind our actions and words? Are we humble enough to ever be wrong? Are we teachable enough to allow others to correct us? And what about are our personal aspirations — whether noble or self-serving — do they blind and deafen us to the message God wants us to hear? Are we so set on our own agendas that we harden our hearts toward what God may want to do in us, and through us?

The key point to remember is that with God's purpose comes accountability. These tenants were sharecroppers. They had a contract with the landowner. There were responsibilities and rewards for both parties. Unfortunately, the tenants didn't want to abide by the terms of the contract. They refused to give the landowner his "produce." This is something we simply can't do. We must be willing to offer the "landowner" the fruit the landowner is expecting.

Next we can discern that the new tenants reveal people whose goal is to turn the vineyard into a fruit-producing farm. They have the interests of the landowner at heart. They take their responsibility seriously. They take the light — their mission — and turn it upon their community and their world. Jesus says that the kingdom of God belongs to the fruitful. A new group of tenants is described twice in this parable: those who give the landowner the harvest which is due him and those who produce fruit. We Christians should always remember that we are changed by God to change the world. When either of these things isn't happening in one of his followers, the Jesus mission has been compromised by that person.

As we finally move on to the landowner we see a God who unfailingly offers light and love to bring people to himself. It's an expensive love. Keep in mind that today's story takes place after Palm Sunday. The cheering crowds are gone. Jesus is within days of being murdered in Jerusalem and he knows it. It's the

tenants, the religious leaders who are the black ones, the light-absorbers, they were the ones that were supposed to be producing and harvesting fruit. After all, the vineyard, by all accounts, was a good one; God so loved the vineyard that God gave his Son for the vineyard. The tenants, Jesus knew, were about to kill the son, they were about to kill him.

Thankfully God is patient — long-suffering even — while waiting for his followers to bear the fruit he desires in them. This is how God's grace and standards fit together. As far away from God as we sometimes feel, God desires us to turn to him in repentance; the relationship is not exhausted yet. But, today's story also suggests that God's patience is not inexhaustible. The eschatological or apocalyptic understanding of the end-times intrudes: The wicked will receive their just reward.

As a final important take on this parable, let's briefly look at God's response to evil, which is especially prevalent considering the war-torn tragedies taking place in Ukraine and now in Israel. People are often racked with questions about how a good God and evil can coexist. Why doesn't God do anything about evil like the abuse and violence in today's parable?

There are two fair answers that can be found in our story. First, note the patience of the landowner. God wants as many to come to repentance as possible. One's heart may be the blackest stuff on Earth, but it is not beyond redemption. Here, God responds to evil through increasing doses of love, until it eventually costs him his Son.

Second, God chooses to respond to evil through his followers. In the face of evil, God keeps sending messengers into it. His response to evil is to send those who do good. When people see and experience wickedness at a personal, or even global level, they invariably ask God with exasperation, "What are you doing about this?" God's answer is often a reversal of the same question. "What are you

doing about it?” When followers see evil, they should sense God’s invitation to extend kingdom healing in that place. This is giving the landowner his harvest. That is what it means to bear fruit.

Jesus’ parable this morning calls for Christians to be Light-reflectors, rather than Light-absorbers. We’re to gladly receive the Light, and then throw it back out into the world. We’re not called to absorb the light, to bend the light, or become invisible. Instead, we are to stand out from, in contrast to, a dead, dark world. We’re to bear fruit. We’re to be stewards of the vineyard’s resources. We’re to be God’s messengers in places affected by evil. We’re to bear the light of Christ and reflect the light of Christ in a needy world. So, let’s shine brightly with the love, mercy, grace, and forgiveness of our savior who died so that we may live! Amen.