No Brainer?
Matthew 21:33-46

Introduction:

Some questions seem redundant.
The answer appears so obvious we don’t have to think about it.
We hear what’s asked and our response is automatic.
It’s a no brainer we say.
The answer is a forgone conclusion.

Evidently that’s what people were thinking in our reading today.
Jesus has told them a story about a landlord who develops a vineyard and leases it out.
The problem is: every time he sends representatives to collect the rent, the tenants kill them.
First it’s one group, then another, finally the victim is his son.
Given this action, asks Jesus, what will the owner do?
How will he respond to this terrible offense?
The answer is obvious responds his listeners.
The owner will kill the tenants.
He’ll give them a taste of their own medicine.
It’s a no brainer.

So today we are going to use this story inquire about our own opinions of the consequences of violent action.
We are going to look at it to see if it is as obvious as it seems.
Is the answer a forgone conclusion?
Are we in fact dealing with a no brainer?
1. At first, we are inclined to agree. The way Jesus sets it up the answer does seem obvious. These tenants are out of control. Their reign of terror has to be ended. They have to be smacked down, hard.

It’s not that we necessarily like this answer you understand. Most of us don’t have a great personal appetite for violence. We’d much prefer to be left alone in peace and quiet. But there are not many of us who reject the use of violence altogether. On the whole we tend to assume that violence can only be dealt with violently.

Exhibit A right now has to be the way we are thinking about how to deal with ISIS in the Middle East. Not long after the President announce that the U.S. would launch a bombing campaign, a survey organization took an opinion poll. The results were curious. Not surprisingly, given the brutality that ISIS has shown, the poll showed a large majority in favor of taking military action against ISIS. People want to strike back at what is clearly a ruthlessly violent organization. But the same opinion poll also showed the support was qualified in two ways. First it revealed that a majority thought military action would not stop ISIS. People didn’t think that attacking them would actually defeat them. What’s even more remarkable though is that is showed a majority of people thought that military action wouldn’t just fail to stop ISIS. It would make the situation in the areas ISIS operates in even worse.

Now we are talking about opinions not outcomes. It’s what people believe will happen not necessarily what actually will happen. But think about those results. People want ISIS to be hit even though they believe it will lead only to more violence.

On the face of it, it doesn’t make a whole lot of sense. It sounds like what is called cognitive dissonance. And yet I think it’s indicative of how ingrained in us the idea of violence and counter-violence actually is. It’s not so much that we choose violence as the best alternative out of an array of options. It’s more that we don’t even see any other options. As far as we can tell the only way to counter fire power is with even greater fire power. It might or might not work, but it’s the only recourse we have.

No wonder then that we are inclined to agree with the crowd’s answer to Jesus. Sure the landowner is going to kill those tenants. Meeting violence with violence is the natural order of life.
2. And yet, maybe we shouldn’t react so fast.
Jesus makes clear he sees things differently.
What he points to is a new beginning.
Instead of retribution, we are turned towards transformation.
He says God’s answer is to violence is not counter violence.
It is resurrection.

Notice how the passage in our reading shifts.
Jesus sets up this situation in a vineyard.
He talks about a landowner and tenants and a harvest.
But in the next breath he’s switched.
After hearing the response to his question, he starts talking about building construction.
The stone the builder has rejected has become the cornerstone.
Woah, you say.
Hold the phone.
Talk about a mixed metaphor.
My English teacher would have had a field day with this one.
We go from vineyards and harvesting fruit to a building and cornerstone.
What’s going on here?
Is Jesus changing the subject?
Has Matthew fast forwarded and skipped something in the telling of this tale?
It’s definitely not what we expect.

I had a seminary professor who had a unique way of explaining the gospel to us.
He had us work on puzzles.
I kid you not.
One day he brought in an array of puzzles.
They included ones you worked with your hands and ones you worked out on paper.
What united all of them was that solving them required you to get out of the box.
Where the solution came was in challenging conventional wisdom.

I think there’s something like that is going on here.
Apply our 20/20 Christian hindsight and we can see the basic idea.
It’s about crucifixion and resurrection.
In the story you have the son who’s murdered and in Jesus’ response you hear about an
ignored stone the importance of which only later becomes clear.
But the way Jesus presents it, he doesn’t simply inform us; he dramatizes how radically
God changes all expectations.
We get caught up in tweedledee/tweedledum choices, but God comes out of left field
with something entirely new and unexpected.

God’s way is not about giving as good as we get.
It is about changing the way the world works.
Instead of retribution we get transformation.
God’s answer to violence is not counter violence; it is resurrection.
3. So now the message is clear: **what we are offered is the opportunity to live a new way.**

This story isn’t meant to get us to quake in our boots.  
It’s not designed to make us fear retribution from a God who is stronger and meaner than any of us.  
It’s meant to show us an alternative.  
We think we’re stuck in a box of violence and counter-violence, but we’re not.  
We can instead enter the community of Christ and live the resurrection life today.

In his rejoinder to his listeners Jesus talks about needing to change their way of living.  
He says the vineyard will be for those who can produce the fruit of the kingdom.  
What that implies is that change is in fact possible.  
To live kingdom values in our approach to the world is not wishful thinking.  
It can be done.

No, this doesn’t mean we can avoid danger.  
We can’t.  
This is not advocating a form of denial where we huddle close, pretend everything is warm and fuzzy and sing “kumbaya.”  
The fact is if any people should recognize how violent the world is it’s us.  
After all, we follow a man who was tortured and executed by the superpower of his day.  
What that means is that there is an alternative to the way we usually think.  
Instead of seeing our choices as a seesaw between passive acquiescence and reactive retribution, God has given us a third way.  
We have been given a new community born of the resurrection.  
What we can do is participate in the work of building a world of peace and justice.

In the first few centuries after Jesus, the church had a distinct way of celebrating communion.  
It wasn’t just a wistful look back at the good old days with Jesus.  
Nor was it a sacrifice continually reenacting the crucifixion.  
It was instead entering into heaven on earth.  
Here is paradise, was what the communion liturgy proclaimed.  
This is a taste of what God’s reign feels like.  
Here we touch beauty; here we are one with each other.

There’s a bit of a sense of that early understanding in our communion today.  
It is world communion Sunday.  
All over the globe people are participating in this action together.  
Christians in Bellevue, in Mississippi, in Russia, Kenya, Iraq and all sorts of other places are recognizing our oneness.

It is a small enough action perhaps.  
But it shows our awareness that we can get out of the box of mutual hostility.  
We can enter the community of Christ and live the resurrection life today.  
It is an expression of the opportunity we have to live in a new way.
**Conclusion:**
There’s no doubt that what Jesus offers can seem very risky.
It’s hard to get our heads around.
And yet that is the promise we have.
The God who met violence against Jesus with resurrection, is the God who can raise our interactions to new life.
Because of the presence of Christ we have the possibility of a new way.
It is why the answer to the question of retribution that we started with is anything but a no brainer.