

Missing the point: Matthew 21:33-46

Jesus offers a stick in his listeners' eye.

by [Gracia Grindal](#) in the [September 11, 2002](#) issue

Hans Nielsen Hauge, often called the John Wesley of Norway, changed Norway much as Wesley changed England. Hauge was born in 1776 to prosperous peasants in eastern Norway. He was a devout young man whose main sources of study were his Bible, his catechism and his hymnbook, and he read these many times over. On April 5, 1796, while working in a field and singing an old German hymn, “Jesus, I long for thy blessed communion”—*Jesu, Sophia, ich suche und lange*—Hauge was struck and knocked out by a light from heaven. He described it later as “something supernatural, divine and blessed. . . . I had a completely transformed mind, a sorrow over all sins, [and] a burning desire that others should share the same grace.”

After months of quiet prayer and thought, Hauge began publishing materials and walking the length and breadth of Norway to tell people what he had learned. While walking, he knit socks and mittens so as not to waste time. The blockade of the Danish kingdom during the Napoleonic Wars had left Norway in penury. People were reduced to baking bread with tree bark. When Hauge arrived in a community, he would suggest that they build sawmills, salt works or breweries—anything that would help them become self-sufficient. Then, after helping them meet their physical needs, he offered them Bible study and prayer. Later, he stayed connected with them through correspondence.

A revival began sweeping Norway. The powers that be felt threatened by Hauge, and in 1800 the government threw him in jail for breaking the Conventicle law, which forbade laypeople from meeting together for religious purposes. The brutal conditions broke his health almost immediately, but he languished in prison for 14 years. When he was released, Norway was a changed country. Hauge had helped to break the mercantilist economic system and the hierarchical system of church government. Today historians call him the first modern Norwegian. His movement got the peasants “off the sauce” long enough so they could board boats to America, and they came bringing with them Hauge’s emphasis on hard work and his love for

the Lord. And did they work! They built lively and vibrant institutions of learning—St. Olaf, Concordia, Augsburg, Augustana, Luther Seminary—as well as hospitals, orphanages, old people’s homes and publishing houses.

Some say that if Hauge had lived in a Catholic country, he would have been sainted. Yet he and his movement are still the subject of derision. Theologians are scornful of his lack of theological sophistication and of his admittedly fierce legalism. His list of sins was long—no dancing, drinking, cards or theater. I was raised on that list of prohibitions, and although I’ve made my share of jokes (Watch out for sex because it leads to dancing . . .), I have few complaints about how my parents raised me. We need some of these regulations. Our children need them.

To commemorate the 200th anniversary of Hauge’s experience, Norway composer Egil Hovland wrote an opera about Hauge’s life called *Captive and Free (Fange og Fri)*. In one scene, the official classes, mostly clergy, are sitting around at a party complaining about this upstart with his low morals, his rabble-rousing and, most of all, his encouragement of women’s leadership. One fine lady announces, “I know my place. I listen in humility to the shepherd whom God has called and chosen.” A pastor answers her approvingly, quoting St. Paul on the subject of women keeping silent in the churches. They conclude with a lively polonaise, in which they sing, piously and in fortissimo, “God in the highest [would] strike down this ungodly man. Amen, amen, amen!”

In telling the parable of the vineyard, Jesus is doing what the opera scene does to its audience—offering a stick in the eye. When the Augsburg Masterworks Chorale and Orchestra performed the opera in Minneapolis in 1997, the audience (many of them churchgoers) enjoyed the scene immensely. It was musically and dramatically extraordinary, but like most good drama, it was also an attack on the conventional wisdom of the audience.

Hauge is still derided by many who know nothing about him but sense that he is threatening something deep in them. Theological students, for example, have been known to celebrate Hauge’s birthday by carousing in front of his bust and otherwise mocking and deriding his legalism. From the perspective of Jesus’ parable, their behavior reveals that they understand Hauge’s attack on their privilege only too well, but can respond to his challenge only in this primitive way. Likewise, Jesus tells the story of the owner of the vineyard to show that his listeners, members of the religious establishment of his time, have missed the point. The story is

breathhtakingly clear. Those who “get it” have to do away with him. They mock him, deride him and finally kill him.

Regardless of how this story worked, whether it was what Jesus actually said, whether he ever spoke in allegories or only in parables, it behooves us to get the story right. It is not just about something back then, but about today. In fairy tales, it's the frog, the rejected little sister or the simple farmer who turns out to be the truth bearer. For Christians, it is the rejected stone that becomes the cornerstone. Listen up!