

“Tenant Farmers in God’s Vineyard”
Matthew 21:33-46
Collegiate Presbyterian Church
October 2, 2011
Worldwide Communion Sunday

Introduction

Martin Luther once said that sometimes
you have to squeeze a biblical passage
until it leaks the good news.

This is one of those weeks.

Our reading is from the Gospel of Matthew
in the 21st chapter.

Jesus has essentially ended his ministry
of teaching and healing in Galilee...
he has turned toward Jerusalem
and what await him there.

His confrontations with his opponents
are becoming more “in your face.”

33“Listen to another parable. There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a wine press in it, and built a watchtower. Then he leased it to tenants and went to another country.34When the harvest time had come, he sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his produce. 35But the tenants seized his slaves and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. 36Again he sent other slaves, more than the first; and they treated them in the same way. 37Finally he sent his son to them, saying, ‘They will respect my son.’ 38But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, ‘This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance.’ 39So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him. 40Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?” 41They said to him, “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.” 42Jesus said to them, “Have you never read in the scriptures: ‘The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord’s doing, and it is amazing in our eyes’? 43Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom. 44The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls.” 45When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they realized that he was speaking about them. 46They wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowds, because they regarded him as a prophet.

Sermon

Jesus’ parable of the wicked tenants is fine...
as long as you hear it the way he tells it –
from the viewpoint of the landowner.

The vineyard is the house of Israel.

The owner of the vineyard is God.

The tenants are all those kings and religious leaders
who God trusted to lead Israel to fruitful obedience,
but who do not.

The slaves whom the landowner sends
only to be abused and killed,
are the prophets.

And finally, obviously,

the landowner's son is Jesus himself,
 who is thrown outside the vineyard and killed.¹
And in the face of all of this rejection and violence,
 the vineyard owner is completely justified
 in taking the vineyard away from these tenants
 and giving it to others who will give him his due.
This parable is fine...
 as long as we can stand beside Jesus
 and point fingers at others.
But let's listen to another parable.²

Once upon a time
 there was a rich businessman from Chicago
 who bought an old run-down, overgrown apple orchard
 in Cambridge, Iowa.
He cleared the brush...
 he pruned the branches and fertilized the trees...
 he fixed up the old barn into a sales shed
 and even put a new, hand-painted sign
 out on the highway.
Then he leased the place to a local family
 for less than market value with the understanding
 that they would give him ten percent of the apples.
They agreed... shook hands....
 and the rich landowner got into his Lexus
 and headed back to Chicago.
After that, no one in Cambridge laid eyes on the man
 for a very long time.

Well, what happened is that the tenants
 began to love that place... almost like it was their own.
They worked dawn to dusk.
 They used organic pesticides.
 They hauled water by hand during the summer drought.
And when an early frost was predicted
 before the apples were ripe,
 they built small fires out in the orchard
 and stoked them all night,
 so that the trees stayed warm under a blanket of wood smoke.

Come October, the air smelled of applesauce
 and every time they took a deep breath
 their mouths would water.
It was time to harvest,
 and it had to be done quickly,
 so they worked in shifts,

¹ Thomas G. Long in his commentary on the Gospel of Matthew, Westminster Bible Companion series (WJK-1997), 244.

² Barbara Brown Taylor tells a similar "alternate version" of the parable in her sermon on this text entitled "God's Sharecroppers." It is published in *Gospel Medicine* (Cowley-1995), 96-100.

half of them sleeping while the other half picked.
Seventy-two hours later the job was done –
 mountains of apples rising
 from the wooden bins in the sales shed:
 Red Rome, Chieftain, Granny Smith.

Exhausted but happy,
 the tenants were standing around
 admiring the fruits of their labor
 when they heard gravel crunching under tires behind them.
When they turned around they saw
 a sixteen-wheeler with Illinois plates backing up to the shed.
Two big guys with bulging biceps got out of the truck
 and started loading apples.
And when one of the tenants went to introduce himself,
 the biggest guy just pushed him out of the way.

Seeing what was happening,
 the rest of the tenants held a quick huddle
 and decided to introduce the truckers
 to the Central Iowa version of the People's Court.
One of them cranked up the Bobcat
 while the others grabbed pitchforks and pruning hooks
 and before you knew it the landowner's men
 were high-tailing it back to Chicago
 empty-handed.

The tenants were in the wrong, of course.
 It was not their orchard.
 They had made a deal.
 The owner deserved his ten percent.
But somewhere along the way...
 in the midst of all those twelve hour days
 and long, cold nights,
 they started thinking of it as "their" place.

And we can understand.
 They were tired of tending someone else's land...
 tired of harvesting someone else's crop...
 tired of making someone else's profit..

Though they were clearly wrong,
 but we know how they felt.
Ownership is a huge deal for us...
 it's in our DNA.
To own our own home on our own land
 on which we grow our own vegetables
 to eat on our own supper table.
 This is the American way!

Yet, if Jesus' parable is to be trusted,
 the American way is not God's way.

Our ways are not God's ways
because in God's reign
the *ownership* of the vineyard is not the issue.
God's vineyard is not, and will never be for sale...
which means that God isn't looking for buyers,
God is looking for tenants
who will love and care for the place...
and who will give back
a share of the produce at harvest time.
We're not talking about ownership here,
we're talking about stewardship.³

It's different with God's people...
though the name on the deed to our house may be ours,
our home is not ours.
Regardless of how hard you worked
or how deserving you are of your paycheck,
it is not yours.
No matter how much we talk about
spending and managing our time,
it is not our time.
Though I may say, "Yeah, they're members of my church,"
or "We do things this way at my church,"
it is not my church.

We are tenants on this earth,
entrusted to love it and care for it
and then to give to its owner his due.
But somewhere along the way
we misplaced the lease
and wrote up a deed instead.
And though we may never have personally
abused or killed any of God's messengers,
we sure have ignored them...
which is about the same.

Yet, according to Jesus,
we're dealing with a very odd landowner here.
Think about it...
after sending countless messengers
to their torture and death,
who in their right mind would send their own son –
unguarded and unarmed – into such a place?
But that's what God did.
God sent God's son into such a place.

And when God did that,
we all learned some things
we had clearly forgotten.

³ Taylor, 98.

We learned that we are really just guests on this earth –
and though at first this sounded like bad news,
it really is good news!

It is good news because as guests... as tenants...
as stewards, we have been given access
to far more than we could ever earn by ourselves.

Instead of a vineyard of one acre tracts
surrounded by stone walls,
we have acres and acres at our disposal –
not to own, but to use and enjoy.

And all he asks is that we work in it,
take good care of it,
and give back a portion of what we produce.

Not because God needs it.

But because we need it.

We need to give in order to remember who we are –
grateful guests in a vineyard we didn't create.

So, do you see what is happening?

A parable that Jesus tells to some first-century Pharisees...
is then told to Matthew's church,
and now, after 2,000 years,
is beginning all over again.

The followers of Jesus

are now the tenants...

the Christian church is now responsible

for the harvest...

it is now your responsibility and joy...

it is now my responsibility and joy...

to give God what God wants –

people who produce abundant fruits of the kingdom.

Of course, there are many ways

to produce fruits of the kingdom.

But since it will soon be time

for our fall financial campaign

let me focus on money.

How can the money that we work so hard for...

how can the money we earn and invest and save –

how can our attachment to that money

be so transformed that we really understand that it is all gift?

Well, Consecration Sunday 2011 is coming up on November 13th.

And I'm imagining that on that Sunday

as each of you sits in your favorite pew,

that you will hear the crunching of gravel under tires

and turn around to see a huge sixteen-wheeler pull up

and open its doors.

And I imagine two burly guys with big biceps

climbing out of the cab

ready to receive the portion of your harvest
that is due their boss.
You offer what you will... maybe 2% of your income.
Even though it's not enough,
even though you're not ready
to give all the landowner is due,
it's what you think you are able to give.
It is what you offer.
But then next year,
when you hear that gravel crunching
you are ready to give more – maybe 4 %.
And the next year 6%.
And the next even more!
And before long you are tithing!

And I'm imagining that you can do this
because slowly, but surely
you are learning the lesson of the parable –
that giving more and more
is actually what you were created to do...
that giving more and more
is actually being more and more who you are –
a steward.

The good news is this;
we are called to tend this earth and its riches
on someone else's behalf.

This someone else went so far as to send his son
to all of us who have hoarded the blessings for ourselves
and not given God God's own due.

He sent his son... and we killed him.
Yet, he would not stay dead.
God raised him from the dead
and sent him back to us one more time,
still bearing the message of God's steadfast love.”⁴

⁴ David Lose in his September 25, 2011 entry, “Crazy Love,” on WorkingPreacher.org.