

The Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Proper 22A, October 8, 2017
Matthew 21:33-43
These (we) are the worst renters I have ever seen!

There is a fable about the Angel Gabriel who has just come from surveying the earth and its inhabitants when he reports to God. "Lord, it's my duty to inform you that you're the possessor of a choice piece of real estate known as planet earth.

God waits patiently for the other news, for with Gabriel, there is always "other" news!

But the tenants you've leased it out to, are destroying it.

In another few years, it won't be fit to live in.

They have polluted your rivers.

The air is fouled with the stench of their over-consumerism.

They frequently kill one another in huge numbers for no apparent reason.

Everyone you've sent to them calling for an accounting have met with violence.

By any rule of sound management and *Accounting 101*, Lord, you've got but one option."

Then raising his trumpet to his lips, Gabriel asked, "Shall I sound the eviction notice now, sir?"

And God said, "No, Gabriel! No, not just yet.

I know you are right, but I keep thinking if I just give them a little more time they'll quit acting like they own the place!" [Stephen M. Crotts / George L. Murphy, *Sermons for Sundays: After Pentecost (Middle Third): The Incomparable Christ*, CSS Publishing Company, Inc.]

Are **WE** not the worst renters you have ever seen?

In today's gospel reading, it is clear that the Pharisees from last Sunday's reading have not learned to think on their feet any better!

For you see, when Jesus is telling parables at their expense, the Pharisees and standing always within earshot of him.

Jesus is attacking their being religious without having their hearts changed by their practices – of simply going through the motions.

It is in Jerusalem – in the chronology of the life of Jesus – we are near the trial and crucifixion. Things are coming to a head – it is as if Jesus is forcing a showdown with the authorities – thus he more openly attacks the Pharisees.

Jesus uses this parable (this story) to show what lousy tenants they have become.

Yet this vineyard owner in Jesus' story from Matthew's gospel must be terribly naïve or extremely patient – and he does not appear to know much about running a vineyard either.

If the vineyard owner did know much about running a vineyard, then he would never have sent anyone to collect what was owed to him after the tenants had killed one of his servants and beaten and stoned two others.

That vineyard owner must be terribly naïve, for he not only sends another messenger, but sends his own son to collect the portion of the grape harvest that was due him.

And the son meets with the same treatment at the hands of the sharecroppers in the story.

As people who live on this side of the resurrection we clearly see the inferences in this parable of Jesus and his death.

But there is NOT much good we can we say about the character of these share-cropping tenants of the vineyard!

They have forgotten who owns the vineyard and FROM WHOM they have garnered such greatness and comfort. But they may not be the only ones who have forgotten such things:

In this parable of Jesus, if this vineyard owner was much of a manager, this would never have happened -- and he may have even decided to cut his losses and simply leave the vineyard to its own devices.

And how could he ever trust anyone again after the treatment his servants and his son have received -- how naive of the vineyard owner to trust and trust and trust again.

In fine rabbinical fashion -- in the tradition of the rabbis and teachers of Jerusalem -- Jesus allows the emotions and the feelings and the RIGHTEOUSNESS of his audience to capture them in the story and to bring Jesus' intended meaning clearly home to their hearts --

-- for these religious leaders are NOT BAD people -- they are NOT heartless people -- within the confines of what they understand they intend to lead devout and religious lives --- they simply have not met such a teacher as this Jesus and his message about the kingdom of God and the demands the kingdom of God brings to lives that are connected to God.

THESE 1ST CENTURY RELIGIOUS LEADERS SIMPLY HAVE FORGOTTEN WHO OWNS THE VINEYARD!

Listen to this story about ownership.

There was a church located next door to a supermarket. Since the church was short on parking spaces and the supermarket was closed on Sundays, the church leaders asked the owner of the supermarket for permission to park in his lot. The owner's response was "Fine. You are welcome to use it 51 weeks a year." "What about the other week?" the church members asked. "That week," said the owner of the market, ***"I'll chain off the lot so you will always remember that the lot belongs to me, and not to the church."*** [Bruce McLarty, Colleege Church of Christ, Searcy, AR.]

This story about the actions of certain religious leaders is also a proclamation about the nature and character of God -- it is a proclamation about how God has and does interact with the people of the world -- it is NOT a story about naiveté; but about unending love -- everlasting love. This is a story about how God risks everything to bring the tenants to their senses. It is a story about what we receive at the hands of God -- the gift of our own forgiveness of our own sins and sinfulness -- what Christians and theologians have come to call GRACE -- experiencing the salvation of God by grace -- by outright gift through faith -- experienced in the repentance we offer -- the change of life we come to experience.

That is the character of the vineyard owner, whose only desire was that those whom he had placed in vineyard delivered what they had promised -- whose desire it was that the relationship begun would continue -- this is also the picture of the nature of God.

In our complicated dog-eat-dog world, the simple message of being saved from estrangement from God, being saved from the ultimate loss and being brought into God's family and everlasting presence by a gift from God through our faith in God's promise of eternal salvation is powerful; but it is a two sided power.

The gift of God's grace -- this gift of God's love is full of power -- full of power for there is nothing else on earth which can conquer the most impenetrable fortress of the human heart; but it is in a way powerless for the gift can do nothing without the consent of the one who is being loved -- read that -- us.

The gift of God's life and love for all people is freedom and joy. It is freedom for us in that we are not subject to retribution and retaliation at the hands of God -- and that is something

we should celebrate each time we come together -- that is what makes us the people of God. It can be joy as we sing praises to God and break this sacred body and drink this sacred blood.

There are times when all of us try to put ourselves in God's seat. There are times when all of us act as if the world is our fiefdom and we are supreme over all we survey. We forget that everything we have is on loan to us from God. We are temporary tenants. We don't own anything, even though we sometimes act as if we own it all. Everything ultimately belongs to God.