

Tenants in God's Vineyard

By: Jon Heerboth

October 4, 2020. The parable of the wicked tenants is a powerful story that contains the entire gospel message. In his sermon today, guest preacher Jon Heerboth delves into the meaning of this reading, and what God expects of us.

Readings: [Isaiah 5:1-7](#), [Philippians 3:4b-14](#), [Matthew 21:33-46](#)

*** Transcript ***

Well, that's quite a parable. Sometimes it is hard to interpret the parables. "Why did you always talk in parables?" we ask Jesus, along with his disciples. The disciples were right there with Jesus and struggled to understand what he was talking about. What chance do we have?

The parable in today's gospel is easier to interpret than many, but its meaning is difficult to accept. Jesus is in Jerusalem. It's a couple of days after Palm Sunday. The people welcomed him with loud hosannas. It's been a long time since the light first shined on Jesus' listeners in Galilee. Many miles have been walked, many words have been spoken, and many wonders done. Jesus has been through the towns and cities of Galilee. He's been in the synagogues teaching and proclaiming, talking about the kingdom of heaven. He has healed every kind of disease and affliction, he's been in Gentile territory, and he's been in Judea.

It's been a long time, many miles walked, many words spoken, many wonders done. Everyone has heard about him or gone to see him. Now Jesus arrives at the temple in Jerusalem, and he puts them on notice. He ran off the people who were selling. He turned over the tables of the money changers and the seats of the dove sellers. He said they were turning a house of prayer into a den of robbers. And then he went back to healing the sick and lame and restoring sight to the blind.

In the gospel lesson, the leaders of the temple came to challenge Jesus. They were the wealthy, the religious elite of their day. They depended on the money spent at the temple to maintain their power. You have to hand it to the chief priests and the elders: when Jesus told them the parable about the bad tenants, they got it. They understood right away that Jesus was talking about them. Jesus showed them the truth, that they were looking after themselves and their own wealth rather than tending to the needs of God's people. Jesus held a mirror to them, and they did not like it. They wanted to arrest him, but didn't want to offend the crowds he drew, who thought Jesus was a prophet.

This parable is a powerful story that contains the entire gospel message. God's people — the vineyard — were producing fruit, but the tenants were not returning any of that fruit to God. God sent prophets, but they were rejected. Jesus is the son of the landlord who came to reclaim what rightfully belongs to his father, but his mission was violently received by the father's own tenants, the very religious leaders who were confronting Jesus on the temple grounds. Jesus told them that the stone that the builders rejected would become the cornerstone. That would be the Lord's doing, and would be amazing. Jesus also told them that the kingdom of God would be taken away from them and given to the people who produce the fruits of the kingdom.

We're going to retell that whole gospel story in the Apostle's Creed in a few minutes. That's the centerpiece of our faith. To reclaim the fruits that rightfully belong to the Father, the Son sets out to restore the world to its divinely created order. Jesus' own ministry revealed what that would look like:

the sick made well, sinners forgiven and restored, the poor cared for, so that the people would praise God. Jesus was here to bring wholeness to a broken world and to give us a glimpse of the kingdom of heaven. He showed us what God wanted creation to look like.

It would be easy to read this parable and turn our eyes to our pastors, our bishops, and the churchwide leaders. Like the high priests in Jesus' time, they are God's tenants in the institutional church, and should make sure the landlord is receiving the fruits of their labor. Let's not leave the entire job to the church leaders though.

When we lived in the country some years ago, our neighbors were all farmers. They were all tenants whose farming had expanded far beyond their original fields. They rented almost any productive parcel of ground they could find. They farmed the land and returned to the landlord cash rent, or a share of the crop — or both, depending upon their agreement. The farmers I knew, and they were very successful indeed, worked hard to keep their landlords happy. They cared for the land. The most conscientious cut the weeds in the ditches to keep the fence lines looking neat. One farmer I know made a point to travel around the country to visit his landlords in person during the winter. If the landlords were unhappy they would rent to another, and the farmer would lose production.

We are all like tenants, aren't we? God has given our congregation and ourselves vineyards to tend. We have our personal lives and families. We have our professional lives. We have our friendships and other relationships. We have our faith and our worship together. Our landlord expects us to produce and share the harvests from every aspect of our lives. When we read again the words of verse 43, "The kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who produces the fruits of the kingdom," we know that our landlord will hold us to account.

In the lesson from Isaiah, the prophet was speaking for God to Israel asking, "What more was there to do for my vineyard that I have not done?" The vineyard was Israel and Judah. God's people were his pleasant planting. That vineyard produced only wild, sour fruit. What was the sweet fruit that God expected? God demanded justice, but saw bloodshed; righteousness, but heard a cry of oppression from the poor of the day. The prophet tried to hold the leaders accountable. What more was there for God to do? Nothing? Then God would tear the vineyard down and stop the rainfall, and God's people would soon be gone.

Well what are the sweet fruits of God's vineyard? What is God looking for from us? Fortunately, Matthew doesn't make us guess. If we walk back Jesus' many steps to the beginning of his ministry in Galilee, we can listen again to the words from the Sermon on the Mount. Who bears the fruit? "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." The mourners, the meek who inherit the earth, those who hunger for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers who will be called the children of God, the persecuted, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven, those who are reviled and persecuted and falsely accused for Jesus' sake. Remember, they did the same thing to the prophets who came before.

If we are committed to a church that bears fruit, we ought to be feeding the poor — not giving cover to the rich. We ought to be concerned about preserving the land God gave us, in terms of the earth and climate change. We ought to be concerned with treating all of God's creatures equally, and not give support to those who have made it their business to be divisive, within the church and in our society as a whole. We don't want to stand behind Jesus and wag an accusatory finger at his opponents. We should put ourselves in the shoes of the high priests and the elders, and allow ourselves to be confronted by what Jesus has to say. When we step back from the lesson and examine ourselves, we can find bits and

pieces of the rebellious and self-serving tenants.

Our charge is to render unto God what is God's. For anyone called by God to a particular ministry, namely all of us, there is temptation to claim ownership of that ministry and to confuse service with entitlement. When we feel a sense of entitlement, we close ourselves off to what Jesus is doing in the world. We are no longer serving Jesus, but are protecting ourselves from him.

Paul wrote about his own sense of entitlement. He said if there was anyone who had reason to be confident, he had more. He listed his pedigree, his compliance with the law, his status as a Pharisee. As a conscientious Pharisee he was a zealous persecutor of the church. He was totally without blame. Paul says all of that is rubbish. It counts for nothing before God. He lost everything he thought mattered, because he learned that righteousness before God can only come from the work of Jesus Christ. Like Paul, we learn that all of the stuff we think we own and in which we trust is rubbish. Everything that matters is God's. As tenants in God's vineyard, we can say with Paul, "But this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus."

Let us pray for God to bless us all, but to extend a hand of particular care to our pastor and professional staff at Christ, so that they may continue to remind us that we are all tenants in vineyards that are the Lord's.

Thanks be to God.

*** Keywords ***

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