

Oct. 4, 2020
Christ the Servant, Reston
Pentecost 18
Matthew 21:33-46

In many bibles Today's gospel is titled, "The Parable of the Wicked Tenants." As with all of Jesus' parables, there are many layers of meaning which may be drawn from the lesson. One of the themes which stand out in the parable is greed. A landowner planted a productive vineyard and left it in the hands of tenants. After the landowner went off to another land, the tenants got greedy. They looked at all the effort they invested in growing the crop, caring for the vines, harvesting the grapes, taking them to market, and yet they resented the fact that the landowner received just as much from the sale of the grapes as the workers did. "Not fair!" they cried. "We deserve better." No, they didn't, but their greed told them that they did. So, when the landowner sent slaves to collect the rent the tenants beat one, killed another, and stoned another. And then it happened a second time. Finally, the landowner had enough and he reasoned, "If I send my son, surely they will respect him." Wrong again, because now the members believed that if they killed the son, the vineyard would be theirs.

Jesus concluded the parable by asking the Pharisees what they thought the landowner would do to the wicked tenants. They conceded that the landowner would eliminate the wicked tenants and give the vineyard to more faithful stewards. Then the light bulb went on in their heads and they realized Jesus was telling the story about them and wanted to arrest him – just like the wicked tenants who went after the son of the landowner.

I am always drawn to the part of the parable where the light bulb went on in the heads of the Pharisees. They were blind to their own greed. "He's speaking about us!" they exclaimed. Well ... isn't that how it is with greed?

If we're good at it we don't even think we're being greedy. We're simply taking what we have rightly earned. And, if we're really good at it, we point to others and blame them for their selfish, unethical, and hurtful behavior.

I'm sure, if we looked hard, we could construct contemporary parables using stories from front pages of our newspapers. We could write a parable about the king who proclaimed himself to be the richest and smartest king in all the realm who, when the truth came out, was found to have gained and lost fortunes by lying, cheating, and fudging on his taxes. It would be a parable about greed – among other things.

Oh, we could find grist for the preaching mill from many places. But, here is some breaking news from the Bible. Jesus was talking about us, too. Jesus was speaking of us in the parable of the wicked tenants. In fact, we are present in every parable Jesus ever told. German theologian Hellmut Thielicke said that we will never understand those parables until we see ourselves starring in them. The wicked renters are us. We have been placed in the lushest vineyard in the world. We have essentially been given everything we need for life; food, clothing, shelter, meaningful work, family, friends, church, and community. And it ought to be enough. For some it is. But, for many, it is not. So we get greedy and ask for more. We structure our lives so that we can accumulate more stuff, more success, more fame, more power, and more trophies.

And, every once in awhile, (each day, actually), the landowner shows up and reminds us that life in the kingdom of God is a partnership. God has given us the lush vineyard. God has a claim on it and on us. But we refuse to acknowledge that God is the source of everything we have. We insist that, no, all credit for the vineyard belong to us and, therefore, the fruit of the vineyard belongs to us, as well.

What is it that God asks of us as tenants of his vineyard, his kingdom? Well God seeks our time. There are 168 hours a week, and yet we find it difficult to spend one quiet one in worship ... 45 minutes, actually, for our live stream in this time of pandemic.

God seeks our abilities. The talents, skills, and abilities are all gifts God has given us. But we often dismiss what we can do.

God seeks a return of our treasures. Everything we have in this world actually belongs to God and is simply on loan to us. God asks that we wisely use what we have and return a portion of it to the work of the kingdom. But we forget to do it. Or refuse to do it. Or complain that the church talks about money too much.

In return for the vineyard, God seeks righteousness. No, not righteousness meaning some pious holier-than-thou living, but righteousness which seeks rightness – justice – for those who have been oppressed. It means being able to proclaim that Black Lives Matter while, at the same time, supporting and upholding law enforcement and praying that our men and women in blue may meet their challenges evenhandedly. Righteousness means holding our leaders to right standards. Right standards. Whatever happened to right standards?

I'll head toward home here with a final story: He was, by all accounts, a successful man. This builder of fine homes in an upscale American suburb was known to all as a creative craftsman, a shrewd businessman, a fair-minded employer, and a generous benefactor. But he was aging now, and before he set out for Florida for the winter, he approached his top superintendent and told him that he was retiring. He said, "I want you to build me a home, the finest home this company has ever built. Spare no expense, use the finest materials, employ the most gifted tradesmen, and build me a masterpiece before I come home next spring."

The next day, the superintendent set out to build that home, but not exactly to orders. If his boss was retiring, that meant he would be losing his job, so he needed to pad his own savings account, lest he be destitute. He ordered inferior concrete blocks for the foundation, but charged the builder for premium blocks, and he pocketed the difference. He hired inexperienced carpenters, plumbers, electricians, roofers, and landscapers, but he charged his boss wages that would be paid to master craftsmen, and he put the difference in his own bank account.

He installed cheap appliances and lighting, insufficient insulation, inferior carpet, and drafty windows. He skimmed a tidy sum off the top for himself. In the spring, when the home was finished, it *looked* spectacular; it was the signature home in the neighborhood, and the only thing that made the superintendent happier than how the project looked was the bottom line in his personal bank account, which had grown by hundreds of thousands of dollars that winter.

When the elderly business owner arrived home from Florida that spring, he toured this home fit for a king, and he was ecstatic. The superintendent handed him the keys and thanked his boss for the privilege of working for him all these years. And then the owner did an unthinkable thing: He said to the superintendent, “You have been a trusted friend and a loyal partner in my business for all of these years. You deserve a home like this.” And he handed him the keys.

It never occurred to me before, but maybe *this* is what Jesus meant when he said to Peter, “I will give you the keys to the kingdom of God.” Maybe *this* is what Martin Luther meant when he penned the last four words of *A Mighty Fortress*: “The kingdom’s ours forever.” We have been given the kingdom. Let’s be good and faithful stewards of it!