

Week 26  
March 15, 2009

## **We've Been Given a Trust** **The Parable of the Tenants**

*Matthew 21:33-46*

Jesus, once again, tells a story about a landowner. This time, the landowner plants a vineyard, builds a wall around it, digs a winepress and constructs a watchtower.

Before going on with the story, let me comment that it's dangerous to assign every character or activity in a parable to a specific person or corresponding event in real history. Sometimes, the crossover from parable to reality is clear and simple. In other cases, it's perplexing but worth trying to figure out the tie-in. Still other times, we're better off *not* trying to stretch the metaphors and similes too far, or else we end up putting words in Jesus' mouth.

This is not a stretch. God is the landowner. God plants life with all of its brimming potentials. To a particular people, he reveals himself and gives them the wherewithal to bear fruit and press wine to bless the whole earth. He makes promises about his pending arrival on the human scene and rents the vineyard to farmers – chooses people to work his land and be a blessing to all creation.

In Jesus' story, the landowner goes on a journey. In human reality, I believe it means that God sits back and honors the dignity of free will and massages the hope that we would use it well. With some freedom, we can have authentic and fruitful relationship with him and one another. Without freedom, relationship would be thin or robotic.

As harvest nears, the landowner sends servants to collect the harvest. To Jesus, these are the prophets who cry out for authentic relationship with God and honorable treatment of the landowner.

But the tenants have grown accustomed to seeing the land as their own property. People forget that "the earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof; the world and all who dwell therein."

Psalm 24:1 Threatened by the landowner's claim on life and by his demand to see fruit, the tenants seize, beat and kill the prophets who come to collect God's due. God sends more servants, but they are also treated badly.

Now Jesus really steps out. He says that the landowner sends his own son and the heir to the empire, in order to collect what is due. Jesus is making one more self-assertion as Son of God and even dares religious leaders to follow through on the schemes that are

fermenting in their minds. “They killed the heir and took his inheritance.” Undoubtedly, there are some people listening to Jesus who believe that he’s drawn a line in the sand – comparing himself to the prophets, pronouncing himself to be Son of God, and predicting his own death at their hands.

“What will the landowner do?” Jesus asks them.

Some answered, “He will deal with those wretched tenants.” Their answer shows that they are either so lost in the story that they don’t recognize themselves as the rebellious tenants, or they are playing along. Or else it’s the wider crowd that answers, not the religious leaders.

Jesus gives a chilling prediction. Quoting Psalm 118:22-23, he equates himself with “the stone that the builders rejected.” In other words, “you will reject me.” Then he looks at those people who are ready to reject him and suggests in no uncertain terms that their fruitless way of life hasn’t passed muster with God. God will give the kingdom over to the trust of others. And he suggests that those who fall all over him will be broken, and that those who are under his judgment will be crushed. Jesus is “the stone that the builders rejected.”

Somewhere along the way, the religious leaders see themselves in the story and react badly. They look for ways to arrest Jesus, and yet carefully, because the crowd is with him.

As we are marching intentionally toward our own celebration of the Easter drama, it’s good to read this parable and see that Jesus was no victim of atrocity. He stoked the fire of enmity by verbally attacking religious leaders and goading them into doing the one thing that Jesus knew he had to do – die for the sins of humanity. With this story and so many other teachings, Jesus paved the way for his triumphal journey through death and back to life again. That alone – as a prod to help bring about his own destiny – is reason enough to tell this story.

But I want to do more application, in part because the longer I’m a Christian the more I start to look like a religious leader. I want to make sure that I’m the right kind. Christ, after all, has come into *this* vineyard, too, and he’s entrusted so much to us, and again, we have the promise of his pending return. How am I – how are we – handling this trust?

God has planted an extraordinary vineyard around us. Not only do we live in an amazing corner of the earth, but life itself is so astounding whenever we pause long enough and carefully enough to ponder it.

The more days that we allow to drift by without that kind of reflection on our part, the more we die every day. The more we lose perspective and miss the proverbial forest for the trees, or even vice versa. We need to learn how to live in the big picture, and even

in our microscopic glances learn to see the big in the little. It's all a miracle and we are privileged to be part of it each day of our lives.

God has built a wall around it. You could say that the wall is the parameters of our sphere of life and influence. Or the wall could even be the number of our days – the length of our lives. For a fixed period of time and in particular places on the planet, we will live out our existence.

God has dug a winepress. He's given us the wherewithal to earn a living and also to build and leave a legacy that will feed and influence others. We have so many years and so many fields in which to sow and water and reap. We have so many opportunities to live and love and labor. To bear fruit and produce.

God has built a watchtower. He is watching over us, the Holy Spirit is our help and comfort, and the good news of everlasting life by grace through faith is our security. He's given us promises and assurances so that we can live with confidence that pushes fear against the wall – nothing can separate us from his love; he causes all things to work for good for those who love him and his purposes; he will never leave us or forsake us. We are ultimately safe, even though life rages with problems and temptations and losses. There's a guard in the tower.

So here's the crux: he's put new tenants in charge of the vineyard, and we are them. We are the ones who work the land and grow the harvest and press the wine.

Call it stewardship or management or simply children doing the chores of the household before we get to enjoy the final reward of eternal bliss. We are the tenants.

What is a tenant? Someone who inhabits and works the ground without owning it. While Christ has paid the rent, God still asks for his due – a life of grateful devotion and applied energy. Our lives are not our own and we do not own our lives or any parts and objects that come with life.

This is the hardest part of the Christian deal. Many resist following Christ because of the implications of this loss of ownership, and all of us renege on the deal periodically.

And that's what we're trying to grow out of. The tenants in Jesus' story were forever possessive and defensive – violently so – about their perceived right to be self-determining. They liked to pretend that they weren't tenants but rather owners. They liked to believe that they were living and producing for themselves. For us, we have enough information and help to experience the truth and benefits of being tenants and not owners; like less ultimate responsibility and burden, which God offers to carry for us, and all the protections that come from having an active and caring owner.

But still, we are responsible in the purest sense of the word. We respond to the enormous privilege of life and new life in Christ. We *respond* well by doing what the

landowner asks us to do.

In a sense, he's gone on a journey. He hasn't left us as orphans. He hasn't abandoned us. He's still involved and concerned and occasionally intervenes in stark ways. Who knows, he might be more involved in the regular operations of life than we realize, versus the notion of a cold, mechanized universe.

But in this sense, God limits himself and steps back: God offers us a lot of freedom as to whether we accept his existence, honor his authority, invite his partnership and obey his dictates. We really do have choices, and when we choose toward God, it's meaningful to him, and when we choose away, it's sorrowful.

Heaven is both our destination and God's vantage point, though his breath and touch reach down into our realities. He is near enough to walk with and dwell within, and far enough not to crowd us when we have to do it, as my three-year-old says, "By myself."

While that individuation has to happen in my son's development, and while our independence validates our steps toward relationship, our first responsibility is that step: to relate with God.

Then, as we know him, we respect him, honor him, and even obey him. Since God has so clearly revealed his nature by sending his son Jesus to put it on display, we can respect and love God enough to *want* to obey him.

And what kind of life does God want for us? A fruit-bearing life. What does a fruit-bearing life look like? People around us are well-served and bettered because we have proven, in word and deed, our interest in them and God's interest in them.

So we honor "the stone" and receive "the heir" as our "Lord." We work the land and pay our dues and bless the world and respect the landowner – even love him!

Since Jesus is speaking harshly to the religious leaders for their poor stewardship and tenancy, it's important to realize who we've become. Now we are the tenants. If the landowner were to send prophets to collect his due, or his own son to receive his full inheritance, how would he find us? Will we be doing the will of the landowner in the full spirit of the covenant between us? Or will we be leeches on the land, merely enjoying the benefits of tenancy without joining the spirit and purpose of the relationship? Will we even be the pretenders posing as owners?

Each of us and all of us can assess our participation in God's plan for us, and we can challenge each other never to forget who's really in charge.