

Text: Matthew 21:33-46

I don't know what you think of the Parable of the Wicked Tenants we just heard. Maybe you feel like it is clear and you get the message right away or maybe you don't get any of this about a vineyard and a wine press and a watchtower. It isn't a scene you identify with. But it is worthy of a deeper look today. If we think we get it right away, then maybe there is something else to find too. If we don't know what's going on, then we can use a little time to reflect further.

Let me set the scene first:

Jesus is in the temple in Jerusalem. It is in the days of Holy Week, after his triumphant entry on a donkey, but before they nail him to the cross. In the temple he is locked in conversation with the chief priests and the elders of the people and they are questioning his authority to do what he has been doing and to say what he has been saying. The general population sees Jesus as a prophet, but they seem him as a troublemaker who is threatening their power and authority.

Out comes this parable, the second of two that Jesus shares with them. As you heard, it involves a scene that might well have been familiar to them: a landowner sets up a vineyard and then leases it to tenants who will care for it. The rent they pay in exchange is a portion of the produce at the end of the season. When the landowner sends his servants to collect that produce, the tenants don't want to give up any of the produce; they don't want to pay the rent so they beat up and kill those servants. The landowner sends other servants and they get the same treatment so finally the landowner sends his own son, but they kill him.

Now remember that Jesus is telling the parable to the chief priests and elders who have been questioning him and who seem to be rejecting him as the son of God. As the parable ends Jesus asks them, “What will the landowner do when he comes himself?” And the chief priests and elders jump right in with the answer that makes sense: the landowner will put the wicked tenants to death. At first, when the words spill out of their mouths, they don't realize that their answer condemns themselves, for they are in the process of rejecting Jesus, God's son. By the end of this dialogue they get what Jesus is saying and, boy, were they upset...upset enough to hang him on a cross.

This parable is most often heard to condemn the religious leaders who stood against Jesus. I think Jesus intended this, but that's not all of it. It could also be applied this to any who would stand against God's purposes, but that's not all of it either. I believe there is more here for us, right now. We are not religious leaders rejecting Jesus nor are we knowingly standing against God's purposes, but there is something, some things for us.

First, we need to hear loudly and clearly that God has a crazy, crazy love for us.

This is how David Lose speaks about the parable and what it says about God's love as revealed in the landowner's role from the parable:

*First he sends servants, and they're beaten, stoned, and killed. Then he sends more – not the police, mind you, or an army, just more servants – and the same thing happens again. So where does the bright idea come from to send his son, his heir, alone, to treat with these bloodthirsty hooligans? It's absolutely crazy. Who would do such a thing? No one...except maybe a crazy landlord so desperate to be in relationship with these tenants that he will do anything, risk anything, to reach out of them. This landowner acts more like a desperate parent, willing to do or say or try anything to reach out to a beloved and wayward child than he does a businessman. It's crazy, the kind of crazy that comes from being in love.*

This is why I read commentaries by other pastors and teachers: because they point out views that I don't necessarily see right away and this is a great example. We can get so focused on the wicked tenants and the religious leaders that we miss the implication of a landowner who comes again and again and again. Just like our God who sent the prophets and then his own Son, Jesus. And then, when that Son is rejected and killed, God raises him from the dead and sends him back to us again! Most of the time we don't see this parable and focus on the amazing love and grace of God, but it is there in neon lights for all to see, isn't it?

We don't have to stand outside of this parable and peer in at the wicked ones. We can admit our own sin of rejecting Jesus and of turning away from him, knowing and hearing that God comes again and again to us, relentlessly and full of passion and commitment to reach us in his love.

But there is more yet for us in this parable, a self-reflection piece as well. Think about how crazy it was for the wicked tenants to think that they could keep the produce and perhaps the whole property. All they had to do was kill anyone who came for it, at least that's what the logic seems to be.

They had been given this land and the means to work the land. The owner had put in the infrastructure: planted, put up a fence, dug the wine press, and built a watchtower. Everything was prepared for them and then handed to them. The owner just asked that a portion of the produce be given back to him. How ungrateful to imagine that they could wrest it away without any regard for the owner and those he sent. You have to wonder how they lost their perspective.

There was a church that was having a parking problem. Its lot wasn't big enough to hold all of the cars for Sunday worship. But across the street was a grocery store with a parking lot that went unused on Sundays because the store was closed. The church decided to ask the store's owner if worshippers would use the lot. Luckily, the owner said yes, that they could park there 51 Sundays out of the year. One Sunday a year he would put a chain across it so the entrance was blocked. Wondering why the store owner would chose to close his parking lot on a Sunday, the church asked him. He answered, "Because I want to make sure that you always remember that the parking lot belongs to me and not to you." *(story from LectionAid, 10/6/02)*

That store owner wanted to make sure that the church didn't lose its perspective on the gift of that parking lot. How easy it is for us to lose perspective on all of the things that God has provided for us. We are brought into this life and everything from start to finish is either given us or all the tools are given us so that we can produce and bring forth blessings. Yet, we can lose our perspective, as the wicked tenants did, and forget that it is all from God.

We are asked to give back to God in gratitude, in acknowledgment, and in joy for what we have. It is not our own and we need to stop ourselves when we start to act crazy like the tenants. When we start to think we are entitled rather than blessed, we begin to lose our way.

We begin our fall stewardship efforts this weekend and over the course of the next 4-6 weeks you will be invited to think about how you give back to God. Our God who pursues us relentlessly out of incredible love has provided for us to live this life. May we approach our giving decisions out of a sense of gratitude and joy and in acknowledgement for all that has been given to us. It is not ours...it is truly a gift.

Let us pray...

Thank you, Jesus, for today's parable and for the messages it offers: that you are crazy in love with us and that you have provided for us. May we not lose our perspective as the blessings of this life come our way. Amen.