

The Tenants and The Owner
A Sermon on Matthew 21:33-46 by the Rev. Philip Major
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Jesus said, "Listen to another parable." A parable is open to a range of interpretations and meanings. In today's Gospel passage, the landowner sends two groups of servants as intermediaries to the tenants. The violent treatment of the servants is often seen as a reference to the mistreatment and disregard of the prophets sent by God to the people of Israel. In response to the violent treatment of the servants, the owner of the vineyard sends his own son, who was killed by the wicked tenants. This can be seen as figuratively depicting the death of Christ at the hands of the religious authorities in Jerusalem.

The broad, connected story of scripture, as seen in parables like this, is always interesting to me. But there are meanings in this story that are simpler and perhaps more relevant for you and me. Jesus offers us truth and wisdom that is not confined to specific situations, times, and places. These scriptures are sacred for us because they address the deeper, basic issues of our lives. Let's consider a few of the themes and details of this parable, and the applications for our lives.

First, and most important, the parable raises the fundamental question of ownership. "Who is the owner?" "Who owns the land we are living on?" The people of the Onondaga nation might remind us that we are not the owners of the land. We didn't create this place. We are not the owners. We are much more like tenants. You and I might say we are the owners of a house, or an apartment, but when we look at our lives from the big perspective, and from the perspective of our mortality, we are tenants, not the owners. The one we call the Great Creator, or the Lord of Love is the owner.

Let's notice that the owner planted the grape vines and provided protection for the vineyard. The owner has invested a great deal of energy to create a productive vineyard. We, the tenants, are working with soil and plants and people and ideas that have been carefully nurtured long before we came on the scene. In the parable, the owner of the vineyard rents it out to some farmers and then goes away to another country. So, from a spiritual perspective, we do not have the privilege of ownership, but we do have the responsibility to be caretakers. We might be looking for God, or the Millennials, or Generation Z, or someone else to come in and rescue us, but we see the results of our treatment of God's creation. We are responsible. If we don't behave as caretakers for the vineyard, conditions will get very bad very quickly. Our role as caretakers for this earthly home, created by God, is fundamental.

The translation printed in your leaflet says, "When the harvest time had come, he sent his slaves...." A more literal translation would be, "When the time of fruiting came, he sent his slaves.." Fruit and fruitfulness is a primary theme of the parable. Let's also notice that this verse ends with the words, "he sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his fruit." So the owner of the vineyard really cares about productivity and the fruits of our labors. Contrary to our expectations, according to the parable, the fruits of our labors don't belong to us; they belong to God.

Let's notice that the tenants in this parable are not just lazy or ungrateful. Depending on which translation you read, the tenants are wicked or wretched. They make elaborate, evil plans to hurt those who tell the truth and do good. The tenants are revealed to be wicked and evil when they begin acting as if they are entitled to be the owners.

Finally, let's pay attention to one detail near the end. According to the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus was addressing one particular group of people when he told this parable. Jesus was particularly concerned about the scheming, the wickedness, and the lack of effectiveness of the

leaders of the community, and specifically of the religious leaders. Those who are in positions of power will be held accountable for their actions.

We are tenants, not the owners of the vineyard. The one who created this place where we live devoted a great deal of energy to making it secure and productive. We are called to nurture and care for the piece of the vineyard we have been given to tend; we are called to be effective. We make grievous mistakes when we begin to act like we own the place.

All of these ideas were rumbling around in my head and in my heart for the first several days of this week. Then I visited June Bisson. June is one of our most experienced members, being over 90 years old. June is also one of my favorite people to visit, because we always have interesting conversations. At the end of our visit, I asked June if I could share a few reflections from our visit with all of you, and she consented.

I visited June on a beautiful, warm October afternoon, so we found a comfortable place to sit outside. We shared communion and talked for more than an hour. By the end of our visit, I realized that June was illustrating what it looks like to be a faithful tenant.

In her early twenties, June was a nursing student. June could have done many things with her time and energy in her life, but June cared most about the deep needs inside people, the deep spiritual and emotional needs. June is an excellent communicator. She is very adept at speaking and very adept at listening. June understands that everyone needs to receive messages of hope and empowerment. So she pursued her education and worked as a clinical psychiatric nurse, caring for people who had very significant troubles in their lives. I'm guessing June was never famous, but I have no doubt she was very effective and beloved by the people she served.

This is what it looks like to be a good caretaker of a piece of God's vineyard. We use the gifts God has given us. We work effectively with the people and the tasks we are given.

June continues to share the gifts God has given her. She talks and listens to many people. She seems to know by name every resident and staff member at Brookdale, which is an assisted living community in Liverpool. June is a talented pianist, and plays hymns and songs on a piano in the living room, often playing special requests made by other members of the community.

A few months ago, June was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. My mother died of pancreatic cancer, so one of the things I know about pancreatic cancer is that it is not usually a long, slow, drawn-out process. When I visited June, I asked her about her prognosis and her symptoms. She was feeling pretty good. She had just received a good report from her radiologist. She won't have to have another check-up until December. June was very glad to be sitting outside, enjoying the sunshine, and the conversation, and the beauty of nature for another day. June's joy and gladness seemed to be founded in a certain absence of expectation or ownership.

It goes back to the first idea of the parable. We are not the owners. We are the caretakers of the land, the caretakers of the resources we've been given, the caretakers of the gifts and skills we have. We are not the owners.

We are reminded of this every time one of our members dies. We read these words in our burial liturgy, *For none of us has life in herself, and none becomes her own master when she dies. For if we have life, we are alive in the Lord, and if we die, we die in the Lord. So, then, whether we live or die, we are the Lord's possession.* We are the caretakers, the caretakers of a life, given to us by God.