

“Whose Place is This, Anyway?”

Sermon, Year A Pentecost 16, Proper 21, Lectionary 27

Text: Matthew 21:33–46

Preached: Oct. 8, 2017 at Immanuel Lutheran Church, Evanston, Illinois

Grace and peace to you from God, the One who is our cornerstone. AMEN

I don't know if any of you have ever been landlords. My advice to you if you're considering it can be summed up in one word: DON'T! OK, maybe that's a bit of exaggeration, but being a landlord and dealing with tenants is not easy. I've owned and lived in two apartment buildings over the years, and in both cases have found it to be a challenge. The first building, right here in Evanston, the tenants became unhappy when I told them that we were selling the building, and the new owners would be moving in a friend who was buying the building with them, so my tenants would have to move. They took out their anger with me by leaving the hot water running constantly so that my bills skyrocketed; they would drop a superball on the wood floor above my bedroom for hours on end, striding across the floor and picking it up, then dropping it again; and when they finally moved out, I discovered three days later that they had hidden rotting chicken parts behind the stove and refrigerator. Apparently, they *really* didn't want to move!

In the second building, a three-flat in Chicago, we moved into the top floor apartment, with tenants on the lower floors who had already been living there for several years. Over those years, they had developed some habits that were not conducive to keeping the building up or to being good neighbors to others in the building. Their rent was always late by weeks. They would pile their garbage bags on the interior backstairs. You couldn't walk up the front stairs without tripping over their shoes, because they kept literally every pair they owned on the landing...and they didn't believe in using a shoe rack. They had taken over the laundry room with their bicycles, to the point you had to move the bikes out in order to open the dryer door. Their kids were knocking holes in the walls in the hallway. So, I started very nicely asking them to change some of those things, both for the good of the building, for the good of their neighbor below them, and for our good as landlords. The result, though, was that the behaviors accelerated...so, instead of just putting garbage on the backstairs, they got a cat and started leaving the used cat box liners out there. No offense to our feline friends who have come for blessing today, but it reeked, ruined the tile. The shoes, instead of being just on the landing, were now scattered up and down the stairs as well. And then the notes started to appear, taped to my front door in the middle of the night. There were complaints about the downstairs neighbor, rest his soul, who was the most inoffensive guy you would ever meet. There were complaints about EVERYTHING, basically.

I finally went downstairs and knocked on the door. They first refused to answer, though I knew they were home. I persisted. Finally after a few days of this, they opened the door, and we were able to talk. I explained to them that the things they were doing were detrimental, and if they continued, we would have to choose not to renew their lease. This drew them up short. Their response was that this was their home, and they could behave how they wished in their own home. But I had to remind them that while, yes, this was where they lived, and where they made their home, it still belonged to me, and it was under my care and my authority. Now, I would like to tell you that it made a huge difference. Not so much, except I went out and bought a shoe rack and they finally started keeping most of them on there. And the kitty litter would only sit for a day or two before being taken out. Small steps but important ones.

Today's gospel lesson is all about tenants behaving badly and forgetting who owns the vineyard they farm, and what the vineyard is there to produce. They've gotten comfortable running things their own way. When the landlord sends his employees to look in on them and to collect the rent, they don't like the intrusion, so they beat one and kill the other two. The landowner sends even more slaves, and they get the same treatment. Finally, he sends his own son, all alone, and they seize him, throw him out of the vineyard, and kill him as well. These tenants sure didn't want the landowner interfering with them and their comfortable existence, did they? They didn't want him demanding anything of them. They didn't want his representatives coming and telling them to do things differently, coming and asking something of them, even though it was something they owed the owner. They were happy the way they were. They felt like the vineyard was theirs.

Now, the temptation here is to say, “Oh, this is only about the Jewish religious leaders, and Jesus' conflict with them.” And you know, that is the original context here, as the larger Jewish community struggled with its identity following the destruction of the Temple, and as the writer of Matthew and the

community he was writing to struggled with how to be followers of Jesus and still be faithful Jews. This passage has been used by Christians to argue that somehow God has rejected Israel and that Christianity has somehow superseded Judaism—a notion explicitly rejected elsewhere in the gospels and Paul’s writings. We must never forget that God’s covenant with Israel is unbreakable. In the Isaiah passage, though God is angry with Israel of that time for its failure to produce the fruits of righteousness in their treatment of the poor and marginalized, in their wandering after other gods, in their economic injustice, if we consider the sweep of the entire book we learn that God’s anger is only for a time, and that God’s desire is always to restore his beloved chosen people, always to forgive, always to bring them back to the vineyard. They *are* the vineyard.

But I think sometimes we’re too quick to decide who is which character in these parables of Jesus. And seldom do we want to put ourselves in the role of those whom Jesus is challenging. It’s easy to see ourselves in the role of the poor slaves who get mistreated by others, or as the neighbors who look on, waiting to take over the garden when those other folks get kicked out. But how are *we* like the ungrateful, unruly tenants? In our personal lives, we begin to think that everything we have and own is ours, that we’ve earned it, and we’re not going to give any of it up to God—even though God is the one who has provided it in the first place. We are tenants, but we live as though we own the place. And we certainly don’t want God interfering too much with the way we’re living and carrying out our lives. We get really nervous when the landlord shows up, don’t we? He might ask us to change things about ourselves, and might ask us to pay some rent out of what he has entrusted to us.

As a society, we are producing wild grapes of injustice and inequity, wild grapes of suffering for the poor and marginalized, wild grapes of conflict and warfare, wild grapes of murderous frenzy that kills and maims. We shout down and silence those prophetic voices that come to us from the true owner of the vineyard, demanding that we produce the sweet fruits of justice, and equity, and healing, and peace. We do not want anything to change, and we certainly don’t want someone telling us what we have to do. But we as tenants will not be held blameless for our participation in those systems that produce sour wine instead of sweet. God demands still that we seek justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God. That is God’s loving purpose for the tenants of God’s vineyard, those are the fruits God expects of us.

And in the church, it’s all too easy for us to begin thinking that this is OUR vineyard, and not God’s. We have our farming methods, thank you very much, we’re spending the money we’ve raised how we want to spend it, we’re maintaining the vineyard the way we want to. We have our system... so leave us alone, God! And sometimes, when God starts sending folks along who change the rhythm of our methods, we get really, really disturbed. This is OUR vineyard, God, and you just stay out of it! We’re doing it the way we’ve been doing it for years. We are just fine, thank you, and we are not going to change anything. Leave us alone. This is OUR home, OUR place, not yours.”

But sisters and brothers, we are all of us tenants here, we’re not the landowner. The landowner has graciously allowed us to live on this land to till and tend it for him and his purposes. But he needs to see results. He needs to see that we are a people who produce the fruits of the kingdom, because producing fruit for the kingdom is the landowner’s deepest desire. Are we producing fruit for the kingdom, and if so, what, and how much? Or are we more often just enjoying living on the land, enjoying its fruits for ourselves, and not giving much thought to the landowner and his desires at all, not giving much thought to who is not here enjoying the fruit of God’s kingdom along with us, and helping to produce more?

We tend to get complacent, living on the land. But we don’t have that luxury. God wants new fruit, new produce, new harvests for the kingdom. That’s why he was willing to send his only Son, all alone, here to us in this vineyard. God has placed us in a vineyard that is planted to produce sweet fruit, fruit for the healing of the nations, fruit of compassion, fruit of beauty, fruit of a loving, forgiving spirit. But our farming methods sometimes get in the way of that. Are we willing to welcome the landowner’s son among us, instead of driving him out, because we like things just the way they are, and we don’t want him changing things? Or can we see that if we allow God’s Son into this garden in a new and fresh way, that we can begin to bear sweet fruit for the One who owns the garden, and whose desire is that we do whatever we are called to do to make the garden fruitful? As we come to this table, and taste the rich bread and the sweet wine, may it remind us of the landowner’s son who gave it to us, and may it give us hunger and thirst to change whatever the master would have us change, that all may enjoy this sweetness with us in a vineyard that grows, and grows, and grows. AMEN