

## The New Tenants

Matthew 21:33-46

I learned a new word this week. Juridical. You might guess that it has its roots in the legal system, but, what I learned is that this parable Jesus just told is a juridical parable. That's a parable designed to get someone to confess their own guilt. For instance, remember when King David has that affair with Bathsheba, and he is so intent on having her for himself that he arranges for her husband, Uriah, to be killed in battle? Well, the prophet Nathan comes to David, and tells him a story about two men, one rich and one poor. The rich man had flocks and flocks of sheep, while the poor man had one little ewe lamb. The poor man raised that ewe like a member of the family – it would eat off of his plate and drink out of his cup, then take a nap on his chest. That little lamb was like a daughter to him. Meanwhile, the rich man is at his palace surrounded by hills covered with sheep, and he gets a visitor, a guest, and he is obliged to feed him, but he doesn't want to kill one of his own sheep, so he takes the poor man's beloved little lamb, and makes out of her a meal for his guest.

When David hears about this detestable man, he gets angry, and says, "As the Lord lives, the man who has done this deserves to die; he shall restore the lamb four times over, because he had no pity on the poor man."

Then Nathan says the convicting words, "You are the man!" David suddenly sees his guilt, not through his own selfish eyes, but through the eyes of Uriah and his family. That's a juridical parable, and that's the kind of parable Jesus is now telling to the leaders of the temple in Jerusalem. It's an easy parable to interpret – a clear allegory where each major part of the parable represents something or someone else.

The vineyard owner → God

The vineyard → the kingdom of God

The tenants → the Jewish leaders (remember, not the Jews because all of the first Christians were Jews; Jesus is addressing the Jewish leaders who reject him)

The slaves that the landowner sends → the prophets who had come before

The son → Jesus

So, when Jesus tells this parable to the Jewish leaders, and asks them what should happen to the tenants who kill the son, and they say the tenants should be put to death, Jesus becomes Nathan, pointing his finger at the Pharisees and scribes and says, "You're the man! You are the ones who will kill the son."

Well, the leaders don't take it the same way David does. David repents of what he has done; the leaders actually plot to do the thing Jesus says they will do!

So, as we listen to Jesus tell this parable, sitting, not in the temple in Jerusalem, but in a house of worship two thousand years later, where do we fit in this parable? Who are we among the characters in this story? Clearly, we're not the vineyard owner – he represents God. We're not the vineyard – that's the kingdom of God. We're not the tenants who reject and kill the servants and then, finally, the son, although I worry sometimes that maybe there are some similarities there. We're not the servants sent to the tenants, and we're certainly not the son! So, who is left? Who represents us?

I guess maybe the sermon title in the bulletin gives it away. You and I are the new tenants of the vineyard. When Jesus asks the Pharisees and scribes what should happen to the tenants who kill the vineyard owner's son, they answer that those tenants should be removed and the vineyard be leased to new tenants who will give the owner the produce of his vineyard at the harvest. You and I are the new tenants who have been given the privilege of working in the vineyard. Through no accomplishment or merit on our part, we have been brought in to tend and care for, to prune and fertilize, to watch over the grapes of the kingdom of God. It is now up to us - we have been given this opportunity to work for him.

And, on this World Communion Sunday as we tenants all gather in our little groups all around the vineyard, and we eat the bread that reminds us of the son's body broken, and drink the cup that remembers his blood spilled, maybe it's a good time to ask one another how the vineyard is looking. How is your section of the vineyard doing? Are the weeds being kept back from the vines so there is plenty of nutrition in the soil for the vines to grow? Are you taking the time to walk through your section of the vineyard, checking on each vine to see how the branches are growing, to make sure they're being protected from the birds who would love to eat those grapes before they get picked? Are you lovingly caring for each vine under your supervision, or are you too busy with other things that really aren't a part of your job as a tenant in the vineyard? Our attention can so easily be pulled away, and before we know

it, the weeds are taking over, the branches are growing wild, and the birds have eaten all the fruit and we've nothing to offer when harvest time comes.

I heard a phrase recently that has been running through my mind all week as this sermon has been gestating within me. The phrase is: "many micro decisions create macro effects." The speaker was talking about our state and the need for making changes in our state gas taxes because the states to our north and our south have lower gasoline taxes and people who live along the borders of our state will drive across into Virginia or South Carolina to get gas and they're taking business away from our own state's gas station owners. Each person who drives across the state line, that's just one micro choice, just one person, one time, but when you add those many micro choices together, it creates a macro effect.

That thought has been staying with me all week in relationship to our work as the new tenants, those entrusted by God to be caring for, growing and producing a crop for his kingdom. We're not being called to make macro effects, huge effects on the world. We're not being asked to be Mother Teresa's – we don't have to move to Calcutta and live in poverty. We're not being called to be Martin Luther King, Juniors, called to die for the cause of the kingdom. But, we are called to make many micro choices that, through the course of our lives will have a macro effect.

What are the choices you and I make each day that either help the vineyard to grow, or keep it from growing? When you awaken each morning, is thanks given to the one who has granted this day to you? Each individual you meet, that person is a vine that needs tended – are you nurturing that vine, or ignoring, or even damaging it? As you move through your day, you make hundreds of micro choices about the words you speak, the things you do with your time, the stuff you put in your mind. Put all of those hundreds of micro choices together each day and they begin to have a macro effect on the part of the vineyard that has been entrusted to you.

Do you choose to focus on making money, or making grapes?

Do you choose to spend your time entertaining yourself, or making others' lives better?

Do you focus on whether others are treating you the way you want to be treated, or do you focus on whether you are treating others well?

Do you encounter people with the goal to enable them to see Christ in you, or with the goal to get something from them?

Our entire lives are made up of all of those micro choices we make each day that end up having a macro effect, that change the course of our lives, the lives of those around us, the growth of the section of the vineyard with which we've been entrusted.

Today, we gather together in this place to remember the death of the son by eating bread that reminds us of his broken body, and we drink the juice of the grape that reminds us of his blood that has been shed. It is a good time to consider how our section of the vineyard is looking. How are you doing in tending the vines God has entrusted to your oversight? For, the Son, though he was dead, has risen, and he will return at the day's end to see how the new tenants have done in growing his kingdom.

Amen.