

*Almighty God, Source of all, Living Word, Holy Spirit:
may your Word only be spoken, and Your voice only be heard. Amen.*

I am a renter.

When I moved into my house, I was often surprised by how often my landlord would say, when I called about this or that, “We want to keep you happy.” I thought, “I’m not that great a tenant, am I?”

But then I began to hear stories about the tenant who preceded me – he made unauthorized changes, ripped out the gardens, and didn’t pay the rent – to the tune of five figures – before finally clearing out, taking some valuable furniture in the process. Compared to him, I’m golden.

I have never owned property – and at my age, perhaps I never will. I never thought of that as a spiritual choice, but it does say something about faith. Because when we think we own things, whether land or houses, money, jobs, people – including our families – we have a different relationship than when we feel we are renting or borrowing or tending to them. The posture of the Christian is one of the tenant.

That’s not how the religious leaders Jesus was talking to felt. They thought they owned their positions of authority. When clergy or leaders think they own the ministry, things go haywire. These guys thought they were in charge – but in God’s realm, God is always in charge and we are always managers or tenants.

This is not one of Jesus’ more subtle parables. It is quick and brutal, and lest the scribes and Pharisees who are listening to him don’t get it, he tells them straight out that they are the miserable tenants in the story. No need for guesswork. But I imagine it still left them puzzled. When he started his tale talking about a landowner who planted a vineyard and built a tower and a fence and all, they must have nodded – “Oh yeah, he’s telling that old allegory Isaiah told about the vineyard – you know the one that is really about Israel before the exile, when they were wild grapes that God was going to abandon? Well, sure, that happened, but now here we are, and we’ve cleaned up our religious act a lot. I know what he’s going to say...”

Only Jesus takes the story in a way different direction, doesn't he?

He's not telling a story about what happens to the vineyard –

he's telling about what happens to the tenants.

The one who are supposed to be taking care of the vineyard on behalf of the owner.

The ones who are supposed to be making enough to live on and

returning the amount agreed upon to the owner.

This is a parable about tenants, about stewards – about leaders. Uh oh...

Jesus does draw the Pharisees in long enough that they give him the punchline.

What should happen to these evil tenants who beat up the landowner's reps

and kill his son? They should be cast out and the vineyard rented to more

reliable tenants, who will give the owner his share at the harvest,

not try to horde it all for themselves. Gotcha!, Jesus might as well have said.

And they realize that he has told this story on them –

he is saying they are the ruthless tenants who have rejected God's ownership,

who have set themselves up as owners in God's stead.

And isn't that always the temptation for us?

We think we own what we've only been given in trust;

we think we're in charge of what we've been invited to tend on God's behalf.

But this isn't Jesus' message.

Jesus suggests consistently that we are stewards of what really belongs to God.

We don't own our lives; we are given them to live as fully as we can.

We don't own our families; we are given them to nurture as well as we can.

We don't own our money; God gives us resources to support us as servants in this life.

We don't own our jobs or businesses; we are given them to grow them,

using the gifts God has given us. It all begins and ends with God.

This might change how we look at the things we think we own, or are in charge of.

You know those mugs for cat-lovers that read,

"Cats don't have owners – they have staff." ? Exhibit A, right here.

Well, there's something in that for Christians – we're doing well when

we can start to see ourselves as staff for the rest of the world.

Some of you may feel like your kids treat you as staff – and in a way you are.

We don't need to spoil them, or even to wait on them,

but our function as parents and teachers is not to shape or control them,

but to support them in becoming who they are.

Do you see your spouse differently if you think of yourself as staff for her or him?

Not a doormat, but a servant serving God in loving that other?

How might we do our jobs differently if we see ourselves as servants seeking the good of our co-workers, our boss, our employees, not our own advantage?

Certainly, our lives at church change when we come not as consumers but as members of a community in Christ.

The Lord wants us to recognize that we are not the owners of what we have –

we are renters, at least; and at best, we are tenants,

entrusted by God with the care of all that is good and life-giving –

and what God wants is for us to take care of what God has entrusted us with.

God wants communities that are good fruit and that bear good fruit.

Good fruit is seen in growth. In producing more and fuller grapes.

In watering and feeding and pruning. And in who we are, who we are becoming.

Good fruit is seen in changed lives.

The first criteria for evaluating any ministry in the church is this:

Are lives being changed through this ministry?

Are people being brought closer to God and being transformed into who

God intends them to be in Christ? That's the fruit that counts.

Being good fruit is something we cultivate as we allow God to cultivate us.

How? First of all by seeing our identity as one of belonging to each other.

Being more rooted together, abiding closely with the One who called himself

the True Vine. Not being isolated grapes, but bunching together,

trusting each other with our pain as well as our strengths.

By making sure our roots are being well-watered in the Word and Sacraments.

Making sure our vine is growing and reaching beyond our walls to feed others.

Isaiah prophesies that the survivors of that ruined vineyard will

“take root downward and bear fruit upward.” I like that.

The deeper we grow together in Christ, the more we reach up and out.

Have you ever known a healthy grapevine to be contained? They climb along the

ground, rooting as they go, up every tree. You can't keep them in.

We are tenants of an incredible vineyard, not only beautiful and fruitful

but set up, equipped, with everything we need to thrive.

Even the challenges we have power and love to help us with.

And all the owner of this vineyard asks is that we give a portion of our harvest

to keep the enterprise thriving.

In a week or so you will receive a letter and a card, an invitation to think about what portion of your harvest you want to commit to God's blessing the world through this church.

That invitation is based on the principles we see in this parable – that we enjoy huge blessings and we return a portion of the harvest. If our harvest is not very big, then our portion is smaller. If our harvest is very big then we're invited in faith to step up our giving to reflect a percentage that seems right and good and blessed.

We are blessed to be a blessing – that's the mindset that makes us model tenants in God's vineyard. By God's grace, by the life of Christ flowing through us, by the power of the Holy Spirit working in us – we can bear fruit for the whole world.

Amen.

Isaiah 5:1-7

Let me sing for my beloved my love-song concerning his vineyard:

My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. He dug it and cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines; he built a watchtower in the midst of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it; he expected it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes.

And now, inhabitants of Jerusalem and people of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard. What more was there to do for my vineyard that I have not done in it? When I expected it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes? And now I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard. I will remove its hedge, and it shall be devoured; I will break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down. I will make it a waste; it shall not be pruned or hoed, and it shall be overgrown with briars and thorns; I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it. For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts is the house of Israel, and the people of Judah are his pleasant planting; he expected justice, but saw bloodshed; righteousness, but heard a cry!

Matthew 21:33-43

"Listen to another parable: There was a landowner who planted a vineyard. He put a wall around it, dug a winepress in it and built a watchtower. Then he rented the vineyard to some farmers and went away on a journey. When the harvest time approached, he sent his servants to the tenants to collect his fruit. "The tenants seized his servants; they beat one, killed another, and stoned a third. Then he sent other servants to them, more than the first time, and the tenants treated them the same way. Last of all, he sent his son to them. 'They will respect my son,' he said. "But when the tenants saw the son, they said to each other, 'This is the heir. Come, let's kill him and take his inheritance.' So they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him.

"Therefore, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?"

"He will bring those wretches to a wretched end," they replied, "and he will rent the vineyard to other tenants, who will give him his share of the crop at harvest time." Jesus said to them, "Have you never read in the Scriptures: "'The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone ; the Lord has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes'?"

"Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit.

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