

Tenants All

First a bit of Bible trivia.

There are only three parables that are found in each of the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke.

There is the parable of the crazy sower, wasting seed by tossing it wherever he wants to.

There is the parable of the mustard seed, that tiniest of seeds (next to the orchid seed of course) that grows into a giant tree-like bush.

And there is today's parable of the tenants in the vineyard.

When all three Gospel writers include the same story, it's a signal that something really important is going on.

It's a snap of the fingers, a tap on the side of the head, to pay attention.

There are two parts to today's story: the first part is about us; the second is about God.

First, the "us" part.

The parable begins with a man who not only plants the grape vines, but who fences it off and puts in the winepress, and adds to all of that a watchtower.

In other words, much like God at the creation, he puts the whole shebang together, then hires some men and women to take care of it.

The owner simply expects his share of what is produced when the harvest comes.

But the tenants, like Adam and Eve before them, decide they are not stewards, they decide they are not caretakers – nope, they decide that *they* are the owners, and with that decision, what had been an arrangement that worked to the benefit of all becomes a disaster of beatings, violence, rejection and death.

The fundamental question, back in old Israel, and even more so for people today is this:

“Are we owners or are we tenants?”

It doesn't take much of a gander to figure that for the most part, modern people, including individuals, businesses and governments, and yes, even churches, claim ownership of everything we touch, in a million and one different ways.

Do I own my own body, and am therefore free to pollute it with every form of toxic garbage or is my body, as Paul insists, the temple of the Holy Spirit?

How about the world's natural resources, like oil and natural gas and timber; are they there for the pillaging?

And taking it closer to home: do we own these church buildings, or are we entrusted with them so that they are used to serve all who are in need?

Do we own our possessions, our time, our talents, or are all of these on loan to us, to use for the greater good?

These are the questions today's parable asks of us, even at 8:30 on a Sunday morning.

They are questions that especially make us preachers balk because more than anyone, Jesus directs his assault at the likes of me, and Fr. Saimone and Mother Imelda and Fr. Fan.

In other words, Jesus knows it's often the religious leaders who are the most stubborn about who is the owner and who is the tenant.

What we have this morning is another example of the parable as hand grenade, the parable as dynamite – always exploding our expectations, forcing an uncomfortable glance into the mirror God insists we gaze at, so that in the gazing, we might change, and in the changing, become citizens of the Kingdom of God.

It's one of those parables where you begin to see how and why Jesus landed on the cross.

We human beings are used to thinking of ourselves as the owners of ourselves, our stuff, our wealth and our world.

The poetry of the Book of Genesis is a powerful reminder of who the real Creator is.

Genesis cajoles us into taking our place as stewards, as caretakers...it warns against usurping the role of God, who is the true owner of all that is.

The commandments we heard this morning serve the same end.

The Ten Commandments are not intended to turn God into a scold; they are intended instead to keep us in right relationship with God and with each other.

And that's what goes so wrong today.

The tenants decide they are the owners.

The tenants maim and beat and kill, all to hold on to what was given to them as a free gift -- and the question Jesus asks us today is this:

"Sound familiar?"

Which brings us to that part of the parable that is about God.

You know that the owner is a stand-in for God.

That goes without saying.

What is not so obvious is how crazy, how reckless, how insane this owner is, especially if your definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again while expecting a different result.

If you listen closely to the story, you hear he sends slaves to collect his share of the harvest.

He sends three of them.

One of the three is beat up, the other is stoned and the third is beaten to death.

You would expect the owner, at this point, to call the cops, or at least bring in his good friend Guido to have a chat with this violent riff raff.

But if you think that, you have another think coming.

Crazy God, the owner, sends even more slaves to reason with these tenants who are now deluded by visions of being owners, and the second group is treated worse than the first.

Now is the time for the big guns.

Now you bring in the muscle and put an end to the nonsense.

How about some fire and brimstone from the Left Behind series?

How about some really tough "wrath of God" stuff?

Someone wake up Jerry Falwell, we need him on center stage!

It's entirely fitting.

But not for God.

Instead of sending in his private army, or legions of the heavenly host for that matter, the owner sends in his beloved, his only son, and you know what happens to him....

One theologian puts it this way:

"It's crazy to be sure, but it's the kind of crazy that comes from being in love.

"What will the landlord do when he comes?" Jesus asks, and all they can imagine is violence:

"He will put those wretches to a miserable death."

"But notice -- it's not Jesus talking right now."

"They condemn themselves."

"That's part of Matthew's story-telling brilliance, I suspect, to have his opponents give voice to their own condemnation."

“But it invites us to consider a very different question: not what *will* that land owner do, but what *did* that land owner do?”

“That is the question ***Jesus*** answers: the landowner sends his son, he sends Jesus to all of us who have hoarded God's blessings for ourselves and not given God God's own due.”

“And after we kill him, God raises him from the dead, and sends him back to us yet one more time, still bearing the message of God's desperate, crazy love for every human being on this earth.”
David Lose (paraphrase).

It is our desperate need to be owners, rather than caretakers, that Jesus confronts in all and each of us, in every part of our lives: from our bodies to our wealth to our time to our talents, to even our church buildings.

Jesus is the stone, rejected by the builders, that crushes in you, that crushes in me, the urge to ownership.

Jesus is the stone that crushes self-interest, that smashes possessiveness; that breaks all kinds of fear and pride and prejudice.

Once done, the stone that crushes becomes the foundation stone.

“And everything that is hurt, everything that seems to us dark, harsh, shameful, maimed, ugly, irreparably damaged, is in him transformed and recognized as whole, lovely, radiant in his light.”
Simeon the New Theologian, Christ's Body.

On that stone, God builds castles of generosity, towers of kindness, palaces of understanding.

Yes indeed, Jesus is the stone that breaks open all and each of us, so that in the breaking open, we might each of us take our place at the table as caretakers, giving to God the true owner, all that we have, and all that we are, and all that we own.