

Pentecost 18 4 October 2020

Gospel Matthew 21.23-32

Contemplatio: Rev'd Wendy Gilbert

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In our Gospel reading Jesus tells the chief priest and elders a parable about some tenants who make decisions grounded in greed, arrogance, disrespect, and selfishness.

As is the way of Jesus, this parable resonates with the story of God and God's vineyard. God who lovingly creates all things and gifts to us to attend, care and reap. God who sent prophets who were at best ignored and at worst killed. God who loved the world so much he sent his only Son. With decisions grounded in greed, arrogance, disrespect, and selfishness he was crucified.

What the tenants in the story neglect to understand - or deliberately choose to ignore - is that they are stewards rather than owners of the vineyard.

When the landowner asks for his rightful share of the harvest, the tenants take offense. As if the vineyard belongs to them, and it is the landowner who is in the wrong for making a claim on the land at all. Somewhere along the way, the tenants have forgotten their place. Forgotten their vocation. Their place in relationship to both the land and the landowner.

To put it bluntly, they have forgotten that they own nothing - nothing at all.

Everything belongs to the landowner.

Theirs is not a vocation of ownership; theirs is a vocation of caring, tending, safeguarding, cultivating, and protecting - on behalf of another. A vocation we share with the tenants, and with each other. Our vocation is lifelong, and our relationship with the landowner is eternal.

It is worth noting that Jesus does not describe the evildoers in the story as thieves or intruders. They are not outsiders - they are the landowner's trusted tenants. He chose them, and granted them creative license to steward the vineyard for the benefit of all.

As God chose us and grants us creative license to steward the vineyard for the benefit of all.

Have we done any better as tenants than those of the parable?

Have we not, like the tenants in the parable, deluded ourselves into thinking that we own the earth and all that is in it, when in fact, we are meant to be stewards only?

Have we not, like the tenants, assumed that God is absent, or apathetic, or uninvolved - and hoarded the beauty and bounty of creation for our own ease, gain, comfort, and convenience?

Have we not, like the tenants, ignored and even maligned the countless messengers who have warned us over the past many years that our predatory relationship with the planet will lead us to destruction?

The truth is, we like possessing things. We like believing that things exist primarily to please, feed, entertain, soothe, empower, and protect us. The idea that we don't in fact own offends many. Stewardship deeply offends. It insults our core sense of entitlement, and threatens our core identity as consumers.

When it comes to the planet, it is crystal clear in Scripture: we are not owners.

We are caretakers of a vineyard God cares about deeply, a vineyard that will not thrive or even survive if we continue to treat it as a cheap, inexhaustible commodity. Our vocation is lifelong, and our relationship with the landowner is eternal. When we hoard, exploit, abuse, or ignore the work

of God's hands, we wound and reject God's heart. When we remain in the marketplace, refusing all offers to enter the vineyard, when we cling tightly to what we have because it is ours and not for anyone else we not only wound ourselves we wound God.

We own nothing - not this planet, not our ministries, not our churches, not even our lives. All gift. Precious beyond anything we could imagine, desire or deserve.

Gift because this is the nature of God, to bestow blessings upon us in the ask to join him in the blessing of the life, the work, and play, the sigh and cry in the vineyard.

May we be good stewards.

May we care, tend, being generous in our words, and in our deeds.

Over the years God has sent prophets to teach and prepare us, and due to his love of the vineyard sent his son to remind, inform, to love, heal and forgive each and everyone of us as we steward the gift of who we are, where we are, when we are.

God trusts us to steward his vineyard.

Pure miracle.