

“TO RENT OR TO OWN?”

Isaiah 5:1-7; Matthew 21:33-46

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When you take a new job or move to a new area, the question generally comes: should I rent or buy? When I was asked to be a District Superintendent for the United Methodist Church and learned that I would be driving about 30,000 miles a year, we investigated the strategy of leasing a car versus buying one. When my son and daughter-in-law moved to Charleston, South Carolina, to begin their medical residency, they weighed the options of renting an apartment versus buying a house. They had no idea whether they would stay in that area permanently or not. Many of us have been in the same circumstance. Today the advice of many is that this is a good time to buy a house. Prices haven't been this low in a long time. That may be good news for prospective buyers, but not for those older folks in our congregation who are trying to sell their homes and move to smaller dwellings or to retirement communities.

Many of you know that we follow the ecumenical three-year Lectionary in planning our sermons and worship themes at Church of the Saviour. How ironic that in the midst of one of the most dramatic home mortgage crises in history the Lectionary reading for this Sunday is about investments and ownership! My friend Joe Harding, the visionary leader whose "Vision 2000" idea swept across the United Methodist Church, was fond of saying, "There is no such thing as a coincidence. What we call coincidence is **God working incognito.**" I am convinced that Joe is correct. And so, what is God trying to say to us this morning through this parable of the tenants in the vineyard?

Jesus bases his story on an old song that is found in Isaiah 5. Can't you just hear the ancient equivalent of a country singer with his or her guitar singing, "*My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill.*" (5:1) The song goes on to say that while the owner planted the vineyard with choice vines, lo and behold, it did not yield sweet grapes suitable for making wine, but wild grapes, sour grapes that have no value in the marketplace at all. Have you ever had stuff grow in your garden or flowerbed that you didn't plant there? Have you ever had your kids say or do things that you didn't teach them to say and do? Has your life ever gone a different direction than you intended? A friend of mine says, "Life is what happens while you are making other plans!" How true!

Well, the vineyard owner in Jesus' story leased his vineyard to tenants while he was on business overseas. When he returned, he sent some of his employees to the vineyard to collect the grapes, but alas, the tenants beat them up and sent them away empty handed. Then the owner sent his own son, whom they killed. Now the owner of the vineyard in his grief throws those tenants out of the vineyard and leases it to those who will do a better job tending the vines and giving him the harvest to which he is entitled.

That's a story about life. That's a story about brokers who have not done a very good job managing the assets with which they have been entrusted. It's a story about what will likely happen to them. It's a great story. Everyone agrees and nods their heads. But all of a sudden, the light bulb goes on. The chief priests and the Pharisees realize that Jesus is speaking about them!

A Sunday school teacher gathered his class around him in a circle and told them the story of the Pharisee and the Publican. The Pharisee, he said, stood so everyone could see and bragged to God that he was not like this other man. The poor Publican stood in the shadows and whispered, "God be merciful to me, a sinner." The teacher talked about the piousness of the Pharisee and ended by saying, "Now class, let's bow our heads and thank God that we are not like that mean old Pharisee."

But we really are like that mean old Pharisee! That's the point of the story! The tenants were given a plot of land to tend. It reminds me of the "garden" in Genesis. The owner had already done a lot of the grunt work. Matthew tells us that the landowner "*planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a wine press in it, and built a watchtower.*" (21:33) Then he left the vineyard in the hands of his tenants. Not their hands, but our hands. Like the Pharisees we have made two mistakes. We thought the land belonged to us. We forgot we were stewards of someone else's property. How dare the owner send servant after servant and finally the man's son to collect the produce! After all, the tenants had worked very hard on this land.

Haven't we done the same thing? Leaving the garden in our hands, we've made it a jungle. War, terror, ecological disaster, families in disarray, confusion, fear and pessimism everywhere, values twisted and the old words given new and strange definitions.

We protest. It isn't our fault. We blame it on someone else. Like Genesis, the man blames the woman, the woman blames the snake. We blame it on the tenants before us. We blame it on the government and the politicians. Some of the darkest chapters in the life of the church are the times we punished the Jews using chapter and verse from this parable.

Jesus will not let us off the hook so easily. In the story, even the chief priests and the Pharisees realize that Jesus is talking about them. As the old Pogo cartoon reminds us, "We have met the enemy and they are us!" This is a parable about us.

When the church collected the stories for the Gospels they left this parable in. Why? It is a word for the church then and now. It is a warning to all religious groups. Be careful lest you forget you are only the tenants. Be careful lest you do not listen to the servants and the prophets God sends. Be careful when the owner sends his son that you do not ignore him or crucify him yet again.

The church today is having its problems. Our denomination can't decide what the standards should be and where the authority should lie. Perhaps our trouble is the same as the Pharisees. We forget that this is God's thing. We forget we are only tenants. We forget that the owner of the vineyard will one day come and ask us for an accounting.

Maybe our task is to stop pointing fingers. Maybe it isn't the liberals or the conservatives who are to blame. Maybe it isn't the government or the terrorists or our parents who are to blame. We are they. Our job is to faithfully tend the garden we have been given. We are to receive those whom God sends our way. We are to make sure that when God walks down our street and stops at our house we do not fail to recognize God in our midst.

What does it mean to be a tenant in God's vineyard in the year 2008? What does

faithfulness look like? I think it means, first of all, to realize that we are stewards of much and owners of nothing. Now that's a hard pill to swallow. Like the tenants in the parable, we are enchanted by this rent-to-own world. We are mesmerized by the idea of being our own boss and having a mortgage rather than a lease. We need to remember that we are tenants, not owners of the things that God has entrusted to us. Second, we need to remember that we will be called to give an accounting for how we have managed our assets.

I read recently a story that comes from Reader's Digest. A couple in the Northeast retired when he was 59 and she was 51. They moved to Florida and bought a 30 foot trawler and played softball and collected shells. The writer said that at first he thought it was a spoof on the American dream, but it wasn't. Then he said he had a dream. He dreamt the couple had come to the end of their life and stood before their Creator. They opened their hands on the judgment day and said to Christ, "Lord, look at my collection of shells." Are you wasting your life on the trivial pursuits of our time? What does it mean to be a tenant of God's vineyard in 2008?

People in business are often amazed that there is not more accountability in the church. Oh, I can assure you that our books are audited. Solid financial policies are in place and are carefully followed. But what about your life, and what about mine? In the early days of Methodism, John Wesley insisted that his congregants meet in small groups for both accountability and support. Without support the Christian life becomes a dreary set of rules: do this, and don't do that. But without accountability, our lives can become flabby and aimless. "How is it with your soul?" Wesley would ask. What are you doing with the gifts you have been given? We are the Pharisees. We have met the enemy and they are us.

A child was lost one evening in the fields outside a Midwestern town. The neighbors rallied and set out to search in many different directions. Long after midnight the child had not been found. So someone yelled into the darkness. "Let's all join hands and make big sweeps across the fields." So they joined hands, and not too long afterward they stumbled on the body of the dead child. Person after person lamented, "**If only we had joined hands sooner.**" It reminds me of the words of Emily Dickinson when she said, "Let us all join hands so that no one will be lost."¹ Rather than to point fingers at one another, let us join hands together. As John Wesley said, "If your heart is as my heart, then give me your hand."

We have been given a plot of land to care for and nurture. It was in good shape when God gave it to us. Our task is the same as those who came before us. It is to leave the garden better than we found it. It will take all of us to make this garden lush and green and productive again. But I believe that this is our job, as tenants of the vineyard. I also believe that God will ask each of us to give an accounting of our lives. What have we done with the gifts we have been given? Let us reach out and join hands and hearts that all might find help and hope and a home in God's vineyard.

Note:

1. Quoted in *Pulpit Resource*. Vol. No., p.