

Bad Tenants

Sermon for East Craftsbury Presbyterian Church

October 2, 2011

Pastor Jim Stover

Text: Matthew 21: 33-46

Main Theme: Now we the Church, this congregation, and individual followers of Jesus Christ are the “tenants” in God’s “vineyard” – and we are expected to produce “fruit” for the Kingdom.

It is a great joy to be with you all today. As most of you know, the past couple weeks have been rather crazy for Kim and me as we transitioned our work lives, our personal lives, and all of our stuff to follow God’s call to be with all of you. And we are very excited to be here.

I, myself, had grand dreams of a relaxing break between a joyous ending to my youth ministry in Virginia and preaching my first sermon here. But between saying all of our goodbyes, preparing for the move, and organizing the many, many details of my ordination service, that time to relax and leisurely my sermon quickly disappeared. In the midst of all that a bit of panic set in, and I wrote to Dave Stoner for advice. His reply, “Jim, welcome to the pastorate.” I’m sure I’ll have many more such moments as I begin my first call to pastoral ministry, but I am very excited about the adventure that lies ahead.

Now to be fair to Dave, he did also offer plenty of other additional advice, but the line I quoted was definitely the best punch-line. And, it’s also rather applicable to our Gospel passage today.

As your soon to be official new pastor preaching my first official sermon on the wonderful “World Communion Sunday,” I had great hopes of expounding upon one of the many passages that connect so well with the meaning of the Lord’s Supper and our connectedness with the worldwide Christian community that joins with us in this observance of a manifestation of God’s love in Christ. Instead we got, “He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the harvest time.” Welcome to the Lectionary.

Rather than an easy, celebratory passage, we get a stern challenge from Jesus that we as a global Christian Church, a local congregation, and individuals had better be serious about the business of producing fruit for God’s Kingdom.

More on that in a minute; but first a bit of background: In our Gospel passage from Matthew 21 we find a Jesus in the throes of bitter conflict with the religious leaders of his time.

Far from the warm and fuzzy Jesus with arms spread wide to welcome all in love, we instead encounter a Jesus raging against his opponents, pointing his finger at them and declaring, “The kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom!”

This passage contains a parable that is a very thinly disguised assault upon the chief priests and Pharisees. And our passage is the second in a series of three such assaults in parable form. In a broader sense, our passage comes in the midst of Holy Week. Jesus has ridden into Jerusalem like a king in what we call the “Triumphal Entry,” celebrated on Palm Sunday. He has gone directly to the Temple and thrown the place into utter chaos by overturning the tables of the moneychangers and driven the merchants out with a whip. And now, when the Temple authorities ask what gives him the authority to do this, he rips them apart verbally, saying that they have betrayed God.

Jesus’ allegorical use of a vineyard in our passage would easily have connected in his hearers minds with the many passages throughout the Old Testament that allegorically compare Israel to a vineyard. God is clearly the owner of the vineyard, and the servants sent by the owner are the prophets of the Old Testament up through and including John the Baptist. And finally, Jesus makes a thinly disguised reference to himself as God’s son, which will only be understood by his followers after the Resurrection.

On a side note, since Kim and I just rented out our townhouse and our own tenants just moved in this weekend, we’re dearly hoping the violent scenes from this parable will not be repeated when it comes time to collect rent!

More seriously, Jesus is making very clear that the whole world and everyone and everything in it belongs to God. We are mere tenants. The nation of Israel had been chosen by God for partnership with God in the transforming and saving work of God’s Kingdom. But instead of bearing fruit, the religious leaders of Jesus’ time have led the people away from God’s work and have attacked those God has sent to guide God’s people back to fruitful ways – and therefore these religious leaders will be replaced.

Now there are two ways in which this passage should make us uncomfortable. First, we, today, cannot read it without being reminded of how passages like this have been twisted and distorted over the centuries as an excuse for anti-Semitism. In no way is Jesus, a Jew, attacking his own entire ethnic group and giving any excuse for racial, ethnic, or religious violence and oppression.

Jesus is telling the Temple authorities and the Pharisees that they are fired. God is now acting to replace them as leaders of God's people – a people now expanded to include both Jews and Gentiles.

Thus, we must never tolerate abuse of passages such as these to justify anti-Semitism. And neither can we accept its use to justify the theological heresy of Supersessionism. We Presbyterians firmly believe that God's covenant with the Jewish people still holds true – and in Christ all the rest of us are now made part of it.

So, if now we in Christ are made part of God's people, and in Christ the leadership in the work of God's kingdom was taken away from the religious leaders who rejected Jesus and now has been given to the Church – which is certainly how Matthew understands this parable. Then we now have even more reason to be made nervous by this passage: WE are now expected to produce the fruit of God's kingdom, and the king is coming to collect. We have already heard Jesus declare that the Temple authorities and Pharisees have been very bad tenants in God's vineyard. What kind of tenants are we?

Folks, as a global Church, as a congregation, and as individual followers of Jesus, all of us are called to produce fruit for God's kingdom. Whether it is sharing the truth of God's love and God's justice far and wide through word and deed, whether it is straight up evangelism, showing compassion to those in need, standing against injustice, or growing in the "fruit of the Spirit" – and it really is all of the above and more – God is looking for our lives, our congregation, and the global Church to produce the fruit of the Kingdom. And if we don't do it, God will find someone else who will.

For shakeups in God's vineyard are nothing new – and they are not just in the past either. As you read the Old Testament there were plenty of shakeups in the leadership of God's people. The eviction of some very bad tenants and replacement with new tenants that Jesus declared was only the latest and most broad-based in a series of such shakeups. And Jesus has no problem continuing to shakeup His Church.

At my ordination service last Sunday, Rev. Steven Kurtz, a mission colleague and mentor, said this: Phyllis Tickle, in her recent book, *The Great Emergence*, tells us that it has been observed that ‘about every five hundred years the church feels compelled to hold a giant rummage sale’ and that ‘about every five hundred years the empowered structures of institutionalized Christianity, whatever they may be at the time, become an intolerable [hardened shell] that must be shattered in order that renewal and new growth may occur.’ ... We are living in and through one of those five hundred year [rummage] sales.” (Phyllis Tickle, *The Great Emergence*, Baker Books, 2008, p. 16).

Steve asked us to wonder what it would be like to have been entering the ministry:

- In A.D. 500, when the last vestiges of the Roman Empire, which had come to adopt Christianity, were falling away.
- In 1000 A.D. with the Great Schism looming, the split in Christianity between Rome and Constantinople, Latin and Greek, the Catholic and the Orthodox.
- In the year 1500 at the beginning of the Protestant Reformation.

Of course, the conclusion is that we are living in just such a shakeup in Christ’s Church today.

Yes, we, all of us – ministers, elders, deacons, and all followers of Jesus – are faced with God looking for fruit from God’s vineyard and shaking things up in these very days among us tenants.

On a global level we can see this as our beloved mainline Protestant denominations shrink, and the whole of western Christianity itself faces an identity crisis as our society seems to be becoming more and more secularized.

Meanwhile, the Christian faith is exploding all over Africa, Latin America, and Asia. Looking at a recent article in *The Christian Century*, we get an amazing range of figures on Christianity in China as just one example. The Chinese government publicly admits to the figure of 20 million for Catholics and Protestants combined—1.5 percent of all Chinese. Meanwhile Catholic China-watcher Francesco Sisci estimates the number of Chinese Christians at 100 or 150 million believers, saying “that would also make the country one of the largest centers of the faith worldwide, with the potential of a still greater role in years to come.” (“Who’s counting China?: Phenomenal growth in the number of Christians” by Philip Jenkins. *The Christian Century*, August, 3, 2010.)

As we celebrate this World Communion Sunday in fellowship with all believers everywhere on this globe, we must acknowledge that the leadership of Christ's church is shifting. It is less and less white and less and less western and less and less European-style Protestant. God wants fruit from God's vineyard, and is willing to shake things up to get it.

But the challenge of our passage today is not just at the national and international level, it is also to us here – the congregation of East Craftsbury Presbyterian Church. We are inheritors of 200 years of tradition – and that's just on this side of the Atlantic. But we cannot just rest on our laurels, rejoicing in the fruit for the Kingdom that our ancestors produced. No, we are called to be God's people who are about God's work in the place to which God has called us in these times now in which we live. With great respect for the traditions we inherit, we must seek together for how God is calling all of us to act together to witness to God's love and justice in this time and in this place. This is not just the work of a pastor or just elders or just the "usual suspects" who volunteer for everything, but the call of Christ is for our faith community as a whole to pray and to seek after God's call for us now and into the future.

Thus I hope to join with some of you in learning about the New Beginnings program on October 13th at a forum being sponsored by our presbytery. From what I have read so far, this New Beginnings program helps the whole congregation discern together how God is leading them to serve God in new ways now and into the future. Stay tuned for more information as to whether we ultimately discern if this New Beginnings program is for us. But regardless, we as a congregation are challenged to minister together here and now in new ways that share the love and justice of Christ in our community here and now. And whether it is youth ministry or a missional outreach to our community, we are all called into this ministry together. For Christ in our passage today is telling us plainly that he is shaking things up in His Church, and we better be ready to produce some more good fruit.

Finally, the call to produce fruit for God's kingdom enters into every area of our own lives. As I'm sure you have already guessed, today I'm not talking about the "no obligation" spirituality that seems to be so popular today. No, today our Gospel passage forces us to confront the reality that everything we have and everything we are is from God and is part of God's vineyard – and we are expected to produce fruit.

One meaningful take on producing fruit for God's Kingdom comes from an article I read by Clay Oglesbee, who says that a friend of his was seeking after God's call for his life. He wrestled and struggled with choosing a direction. He prayed about the options, hesitating to make the choice and fearful of making a mistake, pestering and plaguing God for guidance. He weighed his motives, desires and voices of influence. But this friend "reported that the only answer he seemed to receive was, "I don't care what you do. My concern for you is the kind of person you become. Will you show the fruit of the Spirit? Will you become loving, gentle, patient and generous? Will you display the beatitudes of Christ—mourning over the sorrows of the earth and seeking to become a peacemaker in every circumstance?"

Oglesbee continued, "My friend hoped that he'd soon receive God's real answer to his dilemma, something more exciting or less demanding. But the answers were right in front of him. God does not gladly frustrate us. The goal really is Christlike hearts, minds, lives and ultimate destinations." ("Living by the Word: Sunday, October 2, 2011" by Clay Oglesbee. *The Christian Century*, September 20, 2011.)

As I read that, I couldn't help but be reminded of Paul writing in our Epistle reading today in his letter to the Philippians. It may have sounded strange to our ears but Paul began by recounting why the Temple authorities and Pharisees of his day would have considered that what he, Paul, was in his past made him perfect. But Paul knew that in Christ it is not just the past that matters, rather we as individuals, as a congregation, and as a global Christian Church are called to constantly strive to grow in our service to Christ in new and greater ways and to produce new fruit for God's Kingdom. Thus, let me end with Paul's own words:

"Beloved, I do not consider that I have made [the righteousness of Christ] my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, ¹⁴I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus." (Philippians 3: 13-14)

In Jesus' name. Amen.