

A Proper 22
2 October 2005 5 October 2008
Matthew 21.34-37

God's Sharecroppers

Jesus's parable of the wicked tenants is fine as long as we hear it the way He tells it, from the viewpoint of the landowner. But if we look at it from the other end round, it takes on another feel. Oh, we know the tenants are wrong. It is not their orchard. The vineyard owner also deserved his share of the produce, but there is something about that story that just does not sit right. Maybe it is the casual mention of slavery that seems to be taken for granted, or maybe it is because no one likes an absentee landlord. Or maybe it is because some of us had parents or grandparents who were sharecroppers and we know how hard that life can be: tending someone else's land, bringing in someone else's harvest, making someone else's profit. My father's parents were North Carolina sharecroppers and our family stories of hardship are legion.

It is not the American way. From the very beginning, this country has fueled the dreams of disenfranchised people from all over the world who have come here looking for their own small piece of paradise. My ancestors were Welsh coal miners and tenant farmers who left their homes to come here seeking land grants. They sailed across the ocean to start a new life in the new world farming land of their own. It didn't quite come to that.

But that is the American dream: to own our own home on our own land and preferably to grow our own vegetables for our own supper table. None of this always-looking-over-your-shoulder-handing-your-profit-over-to-someone-else stuff. Most of us in this country believe in ownership, autonomy, and self-reliance. Whether or not we can pull them off, those are the values we have been taught and those are the values we strive to live by.

If Jesus' parable is to be believed, however, those are not the values of the kingdom of God. Ownership of the vineyard is not the issue. It is not for sale and never will be. The owner is not looking for buyers; he is looking for tenants who will give him his share of the produce at harvest time, which means that the real issue is stewardship – a word that puts most of us on the defensive because it challenges our sense of ownership.

We have worked hard for what we have, whether it is a hundred acres or a duplex behind the post office. We have deeds and titles and fence lines to prove our ownership. We have mortgage payment books and tax bills with our names on them. We have gone to a lot of trouble to get these things and hanging on to them requires no small measure of financial courage, but according to this morning's parable we are simply deluding ourselves.

Our ancestors became tenants of the Divine so long ago that most of us have forgotten the circumstances. Somewhere along the way someone misplaced the tenant's agreement and wrote up a deed instead. The landowner spent most of his time in another country, after all, and he was

surprisingly easy to handle. When he sent messengers to remind the tenants of their agreement, all it took was a little burst of violence and those who were still alive ran away empty-handed. The owner could have sent the police, I guess, or recruited his own army of thugs. He could have returned violence for violence, but he didn't. He just kept sending messengers, one after the other, each of them pleading with the tenants to come to their senses and honor their agreement with the owner of the land.

Finally, when there was a whole row of unmarked graves full of messengers outside the vineyard walls, the owner sent his son – unaccompanied and unarmed – to teach the tenants some things they had clearly forgotten. He reminded them that ownership was a game they were playing, that they were guests on the earth, not rulers, and that there was good news in that, because being guests relieved them of certain responsibilities they were not equipped to handle, like deciding who got to be rich and who got to be poor and who got to work and who did not and whose claims to full humanity should be honored and whose should be denied.

He reminded them that being guests placed them in relationship with a host who placed them into relationship with each other, and that once they got over their delusions of ownership, those relationships could be based on gratitude, not competition, so that everything necessary for life could be shared and there would no longer be too little for some because some others had too much.

He reminded them that, as guests, they had free access to far more than they could ever have earned for themselves. Instead of a vineyard full of one-acre tracts divided by barbed wire, they had acres and acres at their disposal – not to own but to use and enjoy – through the generosity of the owner. All he asked was that they take care of it and that they give him a portion of what they produced, not because he needed it – he turned right around and gave it away himself, after all – but because *they* needed it. They needed to give in order to remember who they were: grateful guests, who took their lives into their hands like wrapped and ribboned gifts and who returned the favor by giving themselves away to others. They needed to learn to trust the Lord of the harvest to re-supply after their own generosity has emptied the store-houses.

The tenants killed the son, too, but he would not stay dead and to this day he is still haunting the vineyard, reminding us that we are God's guests – welcome on this earth and welcome to it, so long as we remember whose it is and how it is to be used. We can love it as our own. We can water it by hand and build fires against the frost and take deep pleasure in the harvest. We can even will pieces of it to our children, naming them our successors in the stewardship of the vineyard.

All we may not do is reject the owner and persecute his messengers, because to do that is to court our own destruction. To do that is to forget who we are and where we came from. We are God's sharecroppers. We tend the earth and its riches on someone else's behalf. We are expected to represent God's interests, being as generous with each other as God is with us. We are not owners. We were never meant to be. It is not the American way, but it is the kingdom way, and I will tell you something: the harvest will take your breath away.

In closing, may I get a little practical about stewardship. These are frightening times, financially and culturally. But I say that we must not cave in to our fear. Christians are essential optimists – we know that resurrection comes through death, and we trust our lives to that conviction.

The Bishop does not support Saint Andrew's; we pay our own bills. Electricity, gas, water, trash, insurance, maintenance, salaries for our workers – all cost as much as for any business. The Vestry very carefully monitors and limits our expenditures. We depend on you and all parishioners to maintain our presence and ministry at Saint Andrew's. Please help us as much as you can. Please give generously when you return your stewardship pledge for next year. Thank you.

Based on Barbara Brown Taylor's Gospel Medicine, p. 96-100