

Proper 22 A  
Matthew 21:33-46  
October 8, 2023

*“A Good Tenancy”*  
Rev. Dr. Brandon S. Perrine

*[And Jesus said:] “Listen to another parable. There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a wine press in it, and built a watchtower. Then he leased it to tenants and went to another country. When the harvest time had come, he sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his produce. But the tenants seized his slaves and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. Again he sent other slaves, more than the first; and they treated them in the same way. Finally he sent his son to them, saying, ‘They will respect my son.’ But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, ‘This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance.’ So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him. Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?” They said to him, “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.”*

*Jesus said to them, “Have you never read in the scriptures:*

*‘The stone that the builders rejected  
has become the cornerstone;  
this was the Lord's doing,  
and it is amazing in our eyes’?*

*“Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom. The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls.”*

*When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they realized that he was speaking about them. They wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowds, because they regarded him as a prophet.*

The very first year that I planted a garden of my own was the year of radishes. My forays into gardening tend to be marked by the excess of one particular vegetable and the notable deficit of all others. For example, in the year of green beans, I harvested far more of them than I knew what to do with, but had only minimal representation of other vegetables. Then there was the year of turnips, the year of beets, and worst of all, the year of kale. Let's be honest, does anyone really want a surplus of kale? Anyway, in the year of the radishes, I was renting a room in a house with four other guys. I had planted other vegetables, but only the radishes seemed...happy. There was, however, one tomato. Just one. It was beautiful too – big and red and perfect. I watched every day as that single fruit turned darker and darker shades of red.

On the day I'd decided to harvest my tomato, I returned to the house after running errands and found that it was gone – no longer on the vine. Perplexed, I went in the back door to the kitchen. There, I found one of my roommates with a cadre of his friends enjoying a meal. On the table, shining in ruby-red perfection, was my tomato – sliced, on a platter, and being eaten before my very eyes. I know that my jaw dropped. I know that tears welled up in my eyes. I know that anger burned in my heart. I know that I said nothing. But I did print and laminate a sign which I promptly posted in the garden, warning passersby from helping themselves to my produce! To be fair though, I did have enough blasted radishes to share!

I know next to nothing about growing grapes, but I know enough about growing vegetables to admit that if someone showed up at my garden with a bushel basket to claim their share, I wouldn't be at all happy. But that's exactly what happens in the parable Jesus tells.

A wealthy landowner had a vineyard and hired tenants to tend it. It was their calloused hands that cultivated the soil, tended the vines, and picked the grapes. It was their faces that endured the sunburns. It was their backs that hurt from bending over to pull the weeds. It was their muscles that ached from the labor. But, it was the landowner, who neither toiled nor

suffered, that would reap the harvest. It hardly seems fair, does it? This text is practically begging for a sermon on corporate greed, exploitation of the labor force, or freewheeling capitalism! But Jesus continues.

The tenants resist the landowner – killing and maiming those who come to collect, even the landowner’s own son and heir. Then Jesus asks: what will the landowner do to those tenants? His hearers responded, “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.” Then Jesus dropped the other shoe: his hearers were the wicked tenants in the story. They were the leaders of the people. They were the spiritual shepherds of the nation. And, according to Jesus, they had failed to produce the fruit of heaven’s realm – of Jesus’ dream of a world made whole by love, sustained in peace, and governed with justice for all. According to Jesus, they had failed and would be replaced. Perhaps another sermon is begging to be preached, after all: a sermon on accountability – for *our* leaders, *our* elected officials, and, God forbid, for *our* spiritual shepherds! Are they producing the fruit of heaven’s realm – of a world made whole by love, sustained in peace, and governed with justice for all?

This would be a more comfortable sermon if it focused on condemning corporations or public leaders, but I think there’s a message in Jesus’ story for us too. In an ultimate, big-picture sort of way, we are just tenants too, working our bit of land, planting our seeds, tending our plants. We’re faced with a choice of what we’ll plant, nurture, and care for; whether we’ll fertilize with love, mercy, generosity, and grace *or* whether we’ll poison with hate, greed, dissent, and bitterness. We’re faced with a choice, to grow the fruit of heaven’s realm – of a world made whole by love, sustained in peace, and governed with justice for all – or if we’ll grow something else, or nothing at all. The hard truth is that we can’t take any of it with us. We can just tend it while we’re here and hope to leave something good behind. I know that we all want to be good tenants.

And so today, I’ll to close with a poem written by a British entrepreneur turned poet and environmentalist, Felix Dennis. I was struck by how his

words about planting invite us to see beyond the value of what's planted for ourselves, but to others, long after our earthly tenancy has ended. The poet writes:

*Whosoever plants a tree  
Winks at immortality.*

*Woodland cherries, flowers ablaze,  
Hold no hint of human praise;*

*Hazels in a hidden glade  
Give no thought to stake or spade;*

*London planes in Georgian squares  
Count no patrons in their prayers;  
Seed and sapling seek no cause,  
Bark and beetle shun applause;*

*Leaf and shoot know nought of debt,  
Twig and root [don't speak]— and yet*

*Choirs of songbirds greet each day  
With eulogies, as if to say:*

*'Whosoever plants a tree  
Winks at immortality!'<sup>1</sup>*

May we be faithful tenants during our time. May the fruits we grow be the fruits of heaven's realm – of a world made whole by love, sustained in peace, and governed with justice for all. And may we share freely of the produce, for the sake of future generations. As John Wesley puts it, "Do all the good you can, by all the means you can, in all the ways you can, in all the places you can, at all the times you can, to all the people you can, as long as ever you can." Amen.

---

<sup>1</sup> Felix Dennis. "Whosoever Plants A Tree," Poemhunter.com, June 18, 2015:  
<https://www.poemhunter.com/poem/whosoever-plants-a-tree/>.