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Matthew 21:33-46

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On loan from Jesus

*"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 Word of the Lord. Thanks to be God.

The people hearing this parable would have understood what Jesus was talking about much better than we do. Two reasons for that – first they would have known their Bible better than us and recognized this story about the vineyard as being very similar to a story told by the Prophet Isaiah. Second, they would have recognized the agricultural arrangement of distant landowners and local tenants, in ways that are unfamiliar to us. A landowner plants a vineyard, leases it out to tenant farmers and then goes away. This was a common way that the agricultural economy worked in first century Palestine. Very few people owned land. Now, we might expect in this arrangement that the abuse would take place from the owner to those running the vineyard but, in this story, it is the other way around. It is the tenants who are greedy and evil. In the story when the owner sends his first commission back to the vineyard to collect the harvest, but they were beaten, stoned, and killed. The second time the owner sent more people to extract the harvest and they were treated the same way, beaten, stoned, killed.

If you were watching this horror movie on TV and you saw how the first group and the second group were treated. Then when the owner starts talking about whether he should send his son to try to collect the harvest then you would know how it was going to end. He would be sending his most beloved thing in the entire world into the lion's den. You would shout at the TV, "No, no don't send your son, not your son, its not worth it. Forget about it. Come up with another way but whatever you do – do not send your son!" But alas. The third time the owner sent his beloved son.

The parable Jesus is teaching is a prophecy about how he would be treated. We know how that story ends too. The issue here is not just about murder of the innocent – it is about ownership. The tenants started thinking the land was their property and this distant owner didn't need to be listened to or respected. But as the parable goes, the consequences for this type of thinking and this type of action are harsh. The people who behaved this way, Jesus says are going to be crushed and replaced. Jesus is getting fiery. This type of sermon is what I like to categorize as 'turn or burn'. It is the kind of preaching that makes polite Presbyterians squirm in their pews. It's the kind of preaching that makes you wonder who Jesus was talking about when he says, 'I will take kingdom of God away from you.'

This was the kind of preaching that made the religious authorities and elders to whom Jesus was speaking, filled with rage and ready to put Jesus to death. When they realized *they* were the tenants in the story who did those nasty things they were highly offended but if I am right also probably scared out of their wits. If they were the ones Jesus was talking about and if Jesus was the one people said he was then they were all in big, big, existential, deep, deep trouble. When you are afraid that you might be in big, big trouble there are two things to do – 1) ask for help and beg for forgiveness or 2) destroy the evidence or kill the messenger. Of course, kill the messenger was the plan the religious leaders of the day decided upon. Jesus preached these uncomfortable kinds of sermons, but his preaching career was cut short because people don't like to be told they are not living how God wants them to live.

Times have changed, and generations have passed, and you know what? People still don't like being told they are not living how God wants them to live. So let's figure out what the tenants did wrong so we can make sure this sermon isn't for us. The tenants were the people who did a few things wrong – first they didn't recognize the owner and they didn't produce fruit. The tenants felt like they earned everything they had and everything they had belonged to them. My house, my job, my family, my friends, my 401k, my dog, my truck – MINE! "My vineyard", said the tenants, "distant far-off land owner, no way. I farm this plot, so it is mine!" Those living on the vineyard deceived themselves into thinking they owned the place.

My favorite example of this in the last week in our hometown, is the tussle on Capitol Hill for office space after the Speaker of the House got voted out. Everyone over there is feeling a little too entitled to their office locations. "My office," is a sentiment that clearly doesn't hold up when you work in the Capitol Building of the United States Government, and you are so very clearly a tenant in someone else's vineyard. Come on now!

Rev. Ted Wardlaw told a story about friends of their family when they lived in Atlanta. Their kids met in preschool and remained friends for many years. As the kids got older, they had many sleepovers at each other's home and their homes were stylistically very different from each other. Their friend's house was filled with whimsy – unusual art and furniture and often eccentric little collections of fascinating things, cleverly displaced on the tables and shelves throughout the house. Much of what was inside the house had been rescued from yard sales and thrift shops, because Lonnie, the mother had a vision of what they could become. Ted's children loved being in this loving and creative space. One day, while the family was at school and work, a fire started, due to some faulty wiring in the attic. When the fire was put out practically everything was gone. When

Ted went over the next day to tell the family how sorry he was, Lonnie said, “If there was any doubt before, now I know that it’s all on loan.”

God’s world is not for sale. It’s not looking new ownership. Everything we have is on loan from the Creator. The owner of the vineyard is not looking to sell; the owner is looking for tenants who will take good care of the creation, who will give a portion of the harvest away, who will recognize that it’s all just on loan and be grateful.

You know when you go to an art gallery to see a special collection some of the paintings have labels telling you where they are from...this Monet is on loan from the Philadelphia Museum of Art. This Picasso is on loan from the Louvre in Paris. Our lives are just galleries of collections of things on loan to us from God the Creator. We get ourselves into trouble when we start thinking we are the owner and not the tenant. We are not the owners. We were never meant to be. Everything is on loan.

So go around your house after church today, get out your label maker or your post it notes and write out: “On loan from Jesus” and stick it on everything that you can see. It will change your perspective when you realize that it isn’t ‘MINE’ but it is God’s. Things entrusted to our care require our gratitude. Things entrusted to our care require our respect. Things entrusted to our care require a response. The owner wanted to see that the tenants were taking care of the vineyard and were producing a harvest. The owner wanted to know the tenants were being good stewards.

If we want to make sure this sermon from Jesus isn’t for us...then we need to do three things: show respect, be grateful, and share your stuff.

Thanks be to God. Amen.