

21st Sunday After Pentecost, 2008 (Proper 22A)

Gospel: Matthew 21:33-46

Old Testament: Isaiah 5:1-7

Epistle: Philippians 3:4b-14

Title: Jesus' Stories: The Landlord and the Deadbeats

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Jesus likes to tell stories. His stories start out ordinary, but there's always a twist, always something different, something extraordinary. Last week it was the Father with two sons- one whose yes turns to no and one whose no turns to yes. That was the extraordinary part, that the Lord could take a lazy son and change him into a hardworking member of the family.

This week it is the story of the landlord and the deadbeat tenants. It starts out as a familiar story. A man buys a piece of property and makes some improvements. He finds a nice family and rents it out to them. The problems come when the rent is due. His notices are ignored. What's worse is that the messengers are abused.

The amazing twist in this story, what makes this story different is that the landlord doesn't call the police, he doesn't get a lawyer and sue, no, He sends His only son. He doesn't want to evict the tenants, even after all that they've done. He doesn't want His property back. All the landlord wants is the rent. So when the Son arrives, what do the tenants do? Do they respect the Son? Do they repent and give the rent that is due? No, they do the unthinkable. They kill the landlord's son.

The tenants' logic is flawed. Apparently they think that they have squatter's rights. They think that if they can hold on to the property long enough, it will automatically become theirs. But the crowd listening to Jesus' story knows how it will end. There's no need for Jesus to finish the story. Everyone knows how it will end. The tenants' fate has been sealed. There's no way to reverse course. The landlord will come and settle His business. And He won't just collect the rent. And He won't just evict the tenants. The tenants are now condemned by their own actions. They will be punished for what they've done and will be utterly destroyed.

The problem with the tenants was that they weren't content being tenants. They wanted to own the place. They wanted to run things themselves. They wanted to keep the whole crop for themselves.

When the servants came to collect the rent, the tenants didn't make excuses- "It was a bad crop this year and we've got so many mouths to feed. Can you just give me one more month? I'll promise to pay if you'll just give me more time. You can trust me. I'm good for it." No, the tenants didn't make excuses, they attacked the messengers.

The tenants didn't make excuses and they didn't try to cut a deal with the landlord. They didn't make an offer to buy the property or acknowledge that He is the rightful owner. No, the tenants are in open rebellion against the landlord. They are willing to commit assault, battery and even murder to try to hold on to the property.

But it's the Lord's vineyard. There's nothing that the tenants can do that will change that fact. It was His property. The Lord planted the vineyard. He built the fence and the winepress and the tower. He decided to rent it out to tenants. It's the Lord's vineyard, and eventually He will pass it on to His Son.

Now there are some parables, some stories that are a little confusing. Sometimes the disciples have to ask Jesus to explain them, because they don't understand them. This story is different. This is a parable that everyone gets, everyone knows exactly what Jesus is talking about. Matthew tells us that the chief priests and the Pharisees understand that the parable is about them. They know exactly what Jesus is saying. But they are too afraid to do anything to Jesus because of the crowd.

The vineyard is, of course, God's people, His Israel. As we sang in the psalm, the Lord brought His people, His vine out of Egypt and planted them in the Promised Land. The vine flourished and grew and filled the land.

When the Lord picks a picture, a metaphor, for His people, it is a vineyard. Vineyards are for growing grapes, grapes are for making wine, and wine is for celebrating. It's not a party unless there's wine. For the first of His miracles Jesus provided wine for the wedding guests at Cana, and before He died, He gave His disciples the wine of His blood poured out for them. He also promised that He would drink the fruit of the vine again with the His disciples in His kingdom.

When it's time to celebrate, to feast and to rejoice, the Lord provides the wine, and the wine, the fruit of the Spirit comes from His people. The reason to have a vineyard is to make wine, to bring joy and happiness to all around. The reason God has a people is to bring joy and happiness and life to the world around them. You are salt, you are light, and you are the Lord's wine to enrich and enliven the lives of those around you.

The problem with the first tenants was that they thought they owned the place, and they thought everything was about them. They refused to produce fruit for the Lord, instead they kept all the fruit, all the wine for themselves. They were only interested in their own happiness. They did not listen to the voices of God's messengers, the prophets. Year after year the messengers came to the people and warned them the consequences of not being fruitful and giving their fruit to the Lord. The last of these messengers was John. John's message was simple, "Produce fruit in keeping with repentance." Go out into the vineyard and do the work you've been given to do. As we heard last week, some said yes and some said no. Some went to work and others did not.

Finally, in the last act of love towards His tenants, the Lord sent His only Son. The Lord loved His tenants so much that He sent His only Son to make things right. The tenants recognized Him, they knew who He was. The Pharisees did not reject Jesus because they didn't

recognize Him, they rejected Him because they wanted to run the show. They thought it was their vineyard. They liked keeping the profits for themselves and didn't want any interference. So on a dark Friday afternoon, they dragged the Son outside the walls of the vineyard, nailed Him to the cross, and they killed Him.

And so the Father has given the vineyard to other tenants. He has given made a new people for Himself, through the New Testament of His blood. You are one of the new tenants. The people of God, the church, the new Israel, the Lord's vineyard, now spreads across the land. Peter and Paul were tenants, and Augustine and Ambrose, Luther and Walther, your parents and grandparents have all lived and worked in the Lord's vineyard.

But it's the Lord's vineyard. We are always tempted to think of it as our own. This is our church. No, it's the Lord's church, we are merely tenants whom the Lord graciously invites to live and work here.

There's always the matter of the rent. It's a good vineyard, and produces much fruit. The Lord planted it, and so we can be sure of that. We are called to return a small share to the Lord, to give generously and to show mercy to those in need, to bear fruit in keeping with repentance.

We are always tempted to think that this is our vineyard and to keep everything for ourselves. There's no shortage of fruit. We've all got much more than we could ever use. These are gifts from the Lord and we graciously give them back to Him.

But sometimes we get selfish. We refuse to listen to the Lord's messengers who tell us what the Lord expects of us. We even refuse to listen to the Lord's Son. We are responsible for kicking Him out and killing Him.

Thankfully, the Lord doesn't finish the story the same way that the crowd does. The Lord is no quick to avenge as they expect. The Lord keeps giving His people the opportunity to repent. On Pentecost, Peter tells the people, "God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ." When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, "Brothers, what shall we do?" Peter replied, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call."

Even those tenants who are so wicked that they would kill the landlord's son, even deadbeats like you and me, who are so far behind in the rent that we could never get back on track, the Lord still loves and still calls to repent. There's still time, but the end is near when the Lord will come and judge His tenants.

The Lord loves His tenants, so much that He sends His Son to them. He has given you His vineyard to live in and work in. Come, eat and drink the fruits of His cross, so that you also will produce fruit in abundance.