

Sermons at
First Lutheran Church (ELCA)
Reggie Denton, Pastor

October 4, 2020 (Proper 22, Year A)
Matthew 21:33-46

Let's update this parable a little. When a young man turned sixteen, his father put a set of car keys in his hand and said, "Happy birthday, son." The father had looked forward to seeing the joy on his son's face when he realized the keys weren't to the family car, but to a car of his own. And the father wasn't disappointed.

However, in his first six months of driving on his own, the young man was involved in three minor accidents and received two tickets. When he came home with the second ticket, his father took the car keys away from him. The young man protested, "But it's my car. You gave it to me. I'm WORKING to pay for the INSURANCE."

His father answered, "I gave you the KEYS. I CALLED it your car. But WHOSE name is on the title? It's MY car. Now I'm taking the keys and giving them to your SISTER. We will now refer to it as HER car."

That's a similar kind of story to the one Jesus told. Now we can certainly understand why that young man, AND the tenants of the vineyard, would be upset, but they didn't live up to their RESPONSIBILITY to the OWNER.

A read a story once about a boy who was having some trouble with his little sister. She was always getting into his stuff and breaking and losing things. One day they both received a new box of crayons and he said to his sister, "You have your own crayons now and I won't play with any of them. And you must NEVER, EVER touch any of mine. That's what we call sharing."

That's the way of the world—you don't touch my stuff and I won't touch yours. As we grow up, we begin to think that our STUFF, and our LIVES, actually belong to US, and we can do with them whatever we please. But we DON'T OWN ANY of it; it all STILL belongs to GOD.

Jesus knows the truth about us. Our father has built a beautiful home, and asked us to take care of it for him. Now it's one thing that we've thrown one heck of a party on this Earth, and really messed the place up. We've damaged the landscaping. We've ruined our relationships with our neighbors. We've hurt our closest friends and family. But all of that can be fixed. What's WORSE is that we move in and change the locks and say that this is OUR house, and we don't owe God ANYTHING. We claim it as our own, and think we can use it as we please.

That's what the tenants in the parable are trying to do. It isn't enough for them to keep the FRUIT of the vineyard; they want the WHOLE vineyard for THEMSELVES.

WE ARE those tenants. Why do we hold on so tight? Why is it so difficult for us to give back to God what God has given us?

There's a fable about the Angel Gabriel who has just come from surveying the earth and its inhabitants, when he reports to God. "Lord, it's my duty to inform you that you're the possessor of a choice piece of real estate known as planet earth. But the tenants you've leased it out to are destroying it. In another few years, it won't be fit to live in. They have polluted your rivers. The air is fouled with the stench of their over-consumerism. They frequently kill one another, and all the prophets you've sent to them calling for an accounting have met with violence. By any rule of sound management, Lord, you've got but one option." Then raising his trumpet to his lips, Gabriel asked, "Shall I sound the eviction notice now, sir?"

And God said, "No, Gabriel! No, not just yet. I know you are right, but I keep thinking if I just give them a little more time, they'll quit acting like they own the place!"

God has given us everything we have, and everything we are, to USE. OUR vineyard is EVERY place we've been called by God to produce the fruits of the kingdom – our homes, our work,

our school, our community, our congregation, our relationships, our friendships. And God has given us ALL the tools we need to MAKE it bear fruit. We have EVERYTHING we need.

Jesus said, "Have you not read in the scriptures: 'The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone?'" That's Jesus' OWN interpretation of this parable. Life doesn't revolve around US and what we can get for OURSELVES. JESUS is the cornerstone—the key element—in our lives, the ONE thing that connects and LINES up everything else, the ONE thing that holds it all together.

We are called to be good stewards, to CARE for OUR little part of God's kingdom, and to give it back to God a little better place. We're called to produce the fruits of the kingdom.

That's our responsibility as Christians. But it's not MEANT to be a BURDEN – REALLY, it's not; it's a GIFT. You didn't think it was a burden when your parents handed YOU the keys to the family car for the first time, did you? It was a PRIVILEGE. Somewhere along the line, we begin to think that it's OUR car, and we can drive it however, whenever and wherever we want, until mom and dad take AWAY the keys.

I remember the car my parents gave me to go to college. It was the newest car my family owned at the time. But one day, I fell asleep at the wheel. I'll never forget that crash. I was lucky to walk away from it, and lucky I didn't hurt someone ELSE, but the CAR was TOTALED. My family didn't GIVE me ANOTHER car to replace it. I had to get RIDES to and from college after that. I knew it wasn't a punishment; it's just that I'd WASTED the gift that HAD been given me.

But Jesus isn't talking about a CAR; he's talking about LIFE. It's a GIFT – it's ALL a gift. The keys to the KINGDOM are given to us. God's GIVEN us the kingdom and asked us to take care of it, and make it grow. God has put us in his vineyard and has blessed us in countless ways. He's given us this beautiful earth, to care for and enjoy. He's given us the precious gifts of family and friends, and our brothers and sisters here in the church. We have our health. We have food on our tables and clothes on our backs. We have work to provide for our families. And, as we've learned once again from this pandemic, we DO have TIME to ENJOY those blessings.

ALL these blessings are meant, not to be KEPT, but to be used and appreciated, and passed on to OTHERS, because they BELONG to GOD.

And my friends, so do YOU. YOU BELONG to God, and God is so crazy in love with you, that he sends OTHERS to take care of YOU. And pay attention to what HAPPENS in this parable – when EVERYTHING else FAILS, God doesn't send Gabriel's angels; God sends his SON. Because he loves YOU THAT much.

It's a GIFT – it's ALL a GIFT. Amen.