

### “Tenant Temptation”

Before we look at our sermon text this morning, I want to ask you a few questions. Without knowing any details except the name, would you rather eat a Lenten sandwich called the “Vicar,” or one called the “Doubting Thomas?” Would you rather be served at a restaurant by a waiter people call “Smiley” or one they call “Sneaky Pete?” And one more...would you rather go to a doctor named Dr. Muller or one named Dr. Frankenstein?

As predicted, most of you picked the names that don't sound connected to something bad. A sandwich named the “Doubting Thomas?” What is that, egg salad that's been sitting out too long or something? No thanks. A waiter named Sneaky Pete? What did that guy do to get that nickname, and will he do the same to me? Dr. Frankenstein? I don't think so. This is just how we are when it comes to names isn't it? Anything negative causes us to judge—even when we don't know the details behind them.

The same could be said about Jesus' parables. Of course, they all communicate Christ. And some are easier to understand than others. But they are there to reveal to us God's kingdom and his gifts—those things he desires to give us in his Son. But if we're honest, I still think we judge them by their names. I mean, most of us would probably choose to hear a sermon on the parable of the Good Samaritan instead of one on the Wicked Tenants, if given the choice. Why? Because “good” sounds better than “wicked!” But when we start judging the parables based on their names, we are kind of letting those names direct our thoughts.

It's kind of like that with our parable today. We hear “wicked tenants,” and our minds immediately go to this idea of a bunch of corrupt vagrants refusing to pay the rent and beating up the folks who the owner kept sending to collect it. But it's way more than that. In fact, another name for this parable could be the merciful and patient owner, because the real focus is the way he acts. But this isn't some story to teach us how to treat other people. It clearly communicates the sacrifice God would make for us. But it takes a while to get there. And it does it in a way,

that at first, kind of gives the impression that none of these people understand how things really work in the world.

The owner rented his vineyard out to tenants, went on a trip to another country, and then sent his servant to collect the “rent,” which was the fruit of the vineyard. And what do the tenants do? They beat the servant up and send him away empty-handed. The owner sends another servant. And what do the tenants do? They beat him up and send him away. The owner sends a third. What do they do? They beat him up and cast him out. At this point the logical thing for the owner to do it seems is to either gather his weapons and his meanest posse to take care of this situation, or at the very least, call the authorities. But what does he do? He sends his beloved son, saying that perhaps the tenants will respect him. I mean, this is not the way people do things but this is what happens. And what do the tenants do? They see the son and they say, “Let’s kill him, so we can take the inheritance.” Again, this is not the way things work. You don't kill the heir and get to take the inheritance.

But this part really helps us get into the minds of the tenants, and tells us how delusional they had become. From the very start, proven by the way they treated the servants, they acted not like those who were granted the responsibility to labor in the vineyard but like those who owned it. They did things the way they wanted, even when those things included the beating of innocent people, and then finally, murder.

And what about the owner? From our perspective it sure seems like he failed. He obviously knew nothing about the tenants. They had to have done stuff like this before, but he didn't try and find out. And he kept trying the same thing over and over, choosing not to send the tough guys, but the same servants who could easily get beat up. And then finally, he sends his son to collect and they kill him! From our perspective, none of this makes much sense. I mean where is any show of power by the owner here?

But Jesus isn't telling this parable from our perspective. He’s telling it from his. You see, throughout Israel’s history there was this war against the Gospel—the truth that humanity would be saved by the work of the promised Messiah, not through acts of power, but through humility and love. And this benefit would be given solely by God’s grace, apart from any human work. But the religious leaders kept fighting this and looking to their efforts and perceived worthiness. This is who Jesus is speaking to in this parable—the religious insiders. They are

the tenants—the spiritual leaders who time and time again rejected the message of God’s servants and looked to their own righteousness apart from God’s grace.

But the tenants also represent who we are today. The war against the Gospel is still going on, even in the Church. And this is where temptation for all of us rears its ugly head once again. You see, even though it might not be as obvious as the religious leaders of Israel, those of us in the church are still tempted to work against the grace of God.

Think about this. All of us still want a little control over what’s going on here. We want a little skin in the game. We’re good tenants, we think, so we should be put in charge of something. So we convince ourselves that we are the ones who get to decide what happens in the kingdom instead of those **for whom** God does everything. And this is especially tempting when things are going well. Wow, look at us—our efforts and dedication. Look at us—our great staff, our wonderful volunteers, our successful programs. Look at us—our style and our named Lenten sandwiches. God uses our unique gifts and talents to expand the kingdom, for sure. But the temptation to elevate our efforts can get out of hand—sometimes to the point that we are actually working against the grace of God. I mean, think about the religious leaders, or the “tenants” in the parable. The vineyard was being fruitful. It’s just those who should have given the fruit weren’t willing to give it.

Now I’m not suggesting we are in the same position. I hope most of us see ourselves as tenant farmers, and that any harvest belongs to God. I’m just warning us all of the temptation to forget.

Because what does God say through the prophet Isaiah? *I dug the vineyard, I cleared it, I planted it with choice vines. What more is there to do for my vineyard that I have not done **in it**?* God has given to us the perfect vineyard. And he says, “Be my tenants and receive my gifts.”

And that’s precisely what we have in the church. It’s not our vineyard— it’s God’s vineyard, his church. We don’t get to decide what kind of grapes to grow. We don’t get to take credit. We don’t get to decide who’s in or who’s out, who’s worthy or unworthy to be here. We’re all unworthy! But that’s why the grace of God has called us to be here —to receive his gifts of eternal life.

It seems backwards, especially for those of us who are so used to working and then receiving. But the kingdom of God never looks like what we think it should.

We might imagine it to look like this wonderful display of people offering their best lives to the Lord. But the reality is, at this point, the kingdom is just a bunch of broken but redeemed sinners. Because that's what the kingdom is—messed up lives like all of ours gathered around God's word and sacraments to receive his grace.

It's tempting to think that there has to be more than faith alone in Christ alone to warrant God's grace. But no more needs to be done. As the owner, God planted his vineyard at the foot of the cross. And he waters it with the blood of his Son. And it is there that he gathers all of us in his church where he washes us clean; where he feeds us. Where he says, "I hear your struggle and your confession." Where he says, "I forgive you."

And as loved and forgiven people, we give God all the credit. Then we go out to bear his fruit. We serve; we give; we help in the name of our crucified and risen Savior. And we do it with the hope that working through us, the patient and merciful owner will bring another messed up life into his vineyard, where they will join the ranks of us, the tenants, and receive his gifts forever. **Amen.**