

Ordinary 26A  
October 5, 2008  
Abiding Peace Lutheran Church – Budd Lake, NJ

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Isaiah 5:1-7

Psalms 80:7-15

Philippians 3:4b-14

Matthew 21:33-46

Whose is it?

Today's reading is a continuation from last week. If you remember, this was Jesus' second day in Jerusalem after his triumphal entry. He had entered the temple to teach when he was challenged by the temple elders. Jesus first told the parable we heard last week about the man with two sons. He'd asked both of them to go to work in the vineyard. Both were disobedient to their father: the first said he would not go, but later reconsidered and went. The second said he would go work in the vineyard, but did not go. Jesus says that it was the first son, the one who recognized the error of his ways and later went to work in the vineyard, who truly did the will of his father. By this he was drawing a comparison to those who originally do not believe, but later come to faith.

Today's parable is another vineyard parable, but with quite a different lesson. This parable is called by many names, but the most familiar is the Parable of the Wicked Tenants. You heard the story. There is a landowner who planted a vineyard. Then he leaves it to his tenant farmers and goes away. When it comes time for the harvest he sends his slaves to collect his portion. The tenants kill one slave, beat

another, and stone a third. The man sends a more of his slaves, and these were treated the same. Finally the man sends his son, thinking that surely the tenants would not harm his son. But yet the tenant farmers see the son, assume the landowner is dead, and see this as their opportunity to make good their claim to the land. So they kill the son, too. Jesus asks his listeners how they think the landowner will respond when he hears his son has been killed. His audience responds that surely the landowner will put the tenant farmers to death, and give the vineyard to those who will give him his share at harvest time.

Now, of course, there is an allegorical meaning to this story. This story is like God first sending Moses, then the prophets, and finally Jesus into the world to proclaim God's mission. And the tenants would be the people of the world, who according to Matthew, did not heed the words of Moses, or the prophets, or even Jesus.

Unfortunately, this text – along with many others – has been used to justify the persecution of the Jewish people. Many people have looked at this text and said that the tenants in the parable are the Jewish people. They have used this text to attempt to prove that God has somehow “disfavored” the Jews, and therefore justify maltreatment of them.

But there are two things I'd like to point out in telling you that this is NOT the case. First, the Gospel writer Matthew is writing TO the Jewish people. They are his prime audience. Ask yourself what kind of Christian love Matthew would be showing if his point was that if the Jews don't convert they'll deserve everything that Jesus' hearers said that the wicked tenants should receive?

Second, I'd like you to think back to God's covenant with Abraham. All the way back in the 12th chapter of Genesis God promised Abraham that He would give him many descendants, that they would be blessed, and that they, in turn, would be a blessing to all the families of the earth. This promise remains on Abraham and all of his descendants, including the Jews of Jesus' age and, indeed, those living today. So the question to consider here is: Is it possible that God would break His promise? Would God make a promise to Abraham and all of his descendants, only to revoke that promise later? *I don't think so.* If that were true, then how could we have any assurance that God's promise to us, through Jesus Christ, will remain? No, I most emphatically tell you, God did NOT revoke his promise to the Jewish people. This story isn't about God revoking their "Favored Nation" status. The Jews have been God's favored people, and continue to be. It is only through our grafting onto that root through Jesus Christ that we Gentiles Christians share in that promise.

So what, exactly, is Jesus trying to tell us in this parable? I think that primarily he is telling us that WE are in danger of becoming like the wicked tenants. God has given us a vineyard to work in, and when harvest time comes we will be expected to offer up to God the fruits from God's mission in the world. There is a very clear warning to us here: If we don't bear the fruit that's expected of us, God will take the mission away from us and give it to someone else. This parable is intended to remind us that even though we enjoy a favored status with God because of Jesus, there will be accountability for our participation in God's mission to the world.

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But I'd also like us to step back from these allegorical meanings of this parable and take it as more of an analogy. What if we were to view the vineyard as all of creation? What if we were to think of ourselves as tenant farmers that God has put in charge of creation?

Again, looking back at the book of Genesis, we hear the creation story. On the fifth day God creates the fish and birds; on the sixth day God creates all other manner of animal, and finally, humans. Genesis says, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth."<sup>1</sup>

So perhaps the question for us today is: What does it mean that we have “dominion” over creation? If all of creation is the vineyard that God has given into our care, how are we to care for it in a way that is pleasing to God according to the “dominion” that God has given us over creation?

Think back to when you were taking confirmation instruction. The First Article of the Apostles’ Creed is about creation. Every week we say, “I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth.” Martin Luther posed the question, “What does this mean?” And here’s what he said:

I believe that God has created me together with all that exists. God has given me and still preserves my body and soul: eyes, ears, and all limbs and senses; reason and all mental faculties.

In addition, God daily and abundantly provides shoes and clothing, food and drink, house and farm, spouse and children, fields, livestock, and all property – along with all the necessities and nourishment for this body and life. God protects me against all danger and shields and preserves me from all evil. And all this is done out of pure, fatherly, and divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness of mine at all! For all of this I owe it to God to thank and praise, serve and obey him. This is most certainly true.

Several years ago Lutheran pastor and theologian Harry Wendt authored a little book entitled, “An Apostles’ Creed for the New Millennium.” In this book Dr. Wendt proposes an expanded version of the Creed for our own time, hoping to bring to us a better understanding of the Creed and all its implications for our own generation. Dr. Wendt rephrases the First Article of the Creed as follows: “We believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker *and Owner* of Heaven and Earth. *We believe that we do not and cannot give God anything, but merely manage what belongs to God, including the body and life God is lending us.*”

He then goes on to explain how we might view and use creation, and indeed, our very lives differently if we did this from the perspective of the fact that we own nothing. As he puts it, we are merely managers of everything that is put into our care. Or, as it relates to our parable today, we are merely tenants in the vineyard.

According to Dr. Wendt, when God in Genesis give mankind “dominion” over everything, the intent is that we are managers; God is still the owner. Our “dominion” is to manage responsibly everything that God has entrusted into our care. As Martin Luther reminded us in his explanation of the First Article of the Creed, all that we have and all that we are is a gift from God. It doesn’t belong to us.

Dr. Wendt then goes on to say that how we manage the resources given into our care is a matter of stewardship. Now, of course, when I say the word stewardship people automatically think about money. But our stewardship has a much broader responsibility than merely money; our stewardship pertains to all that which is entrusted to our management.

But, Dr. Wendt does have a few things to say in his little book regarding our management of money. He says:

There is no such thing as Christian “giving.” There is merely Christian “management.” When we place something on an offering plate in a church, or contribute to a charity, we give God nothing. We merely get our hands off some of what *always has belonged to God, and always will belong to God.* The appeal in Christian circles should not be “Give more!” but “Keep less!” Problems relating to the funding of needy causes have to do with un-Christian keeping, not with Christian giving.<sup>2</sup>

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The thoughts I'd like to leave with you today are these: All that we see around us, and even our very selves, are the "vineyard" that God has made. We have been made tenant farmers in this vineyard. This is an awesome responsibility, which demonstrates just how much love and trust that God places in us, his managers. I pray that we would manage well all the resources that have been given into our care so that, in the end, we will be deemed worthy tenants.

Amen.

<1,751 words>

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 1:20-30

<sup>2</sup> Harry Wendt, *An Apostles' Creed for the New Millennium* (Minneapolis: Crossways International, 2000), 22.