

FROM BEAR CREEK UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
Will God Kill the Wicked Tenants?

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Matthew 21:33-43

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Today's scripture is a great one for our current stewardship campaign. Almost everything needed to encourage us to be good stewards is here.

We, in truth, have nothing for everything that we call "ours" is loaned to us by God. God has done everything to set us up for prosperity. God has planted all the vineyards necessary to make us wealthy. God has put a fence around the vineyard to keep our crops safe from the wild animals. God has dug a wine press in the vineyard so that we can convert our harvest to a cash crop. And God has built a watchtower so that we might know when our enemies are coming. Everything is ready for us to work and prosper. Everything we need we have. We need only to know our particular vineyard, work it, and enjoy the benefits of the harvest. What a wonderful landowner is God.

But what kind of tenants are we? The land is being overworked and despoiled. We are at war with our companion farmers. Though there is an abundance which makes us obese, one in every five of our children is starving, many dying. I one time received an email that indicated what it might be like if God kept score:

One day God was looking down at Earth and saw all of the rascally behavior that was going on. He decided to send an angel down to Earth to check it out. So he called one of His angels and sent the angel to Earth for a time.

When she returned, she told God, "Yes, it is bad on Earth; 95% are misbehaving and 5% are not.

He thought for a moment and said, "Maybe I had better send down a second angel to get another opinion," So God called another angel and sent her to Earth for a time too.

When that angel returned she went to God and said, "Yes, the Earth is in decline; 95% are misbehaving and 5% are being good."

God was not pleased. So He decided to E-mail the 5% that were good because He wanted to encourage them; give them a little something to help them keep going.

Do you know what that E-mail said?

Then there was a long space in the e-mail and scrolling down I finally came to this:

You didn't get one either, huh?????

We can be lousy, even wicked, tenants. God sends messengers, angels and prophets, even his son to remind us to whom the vineyard, the fence, the winepress and the watchtower belong. And too often we ignore the messengers and too often we have been guilty of killing the messenger.

So what does this generous God want from us as our rent payment? We are given many answers, often answers of doctrine

and ritual. Some would say that God wants a particular brand of faith. Should we be Buddhist, Jew, Moslem, Christian or something else? And if we are to be Christian, what kind of Christian, conservative, evangelical, fundamentalist, holiness, liberal, mystic, what?

What we have made complicated and even the source of war, God has made quite simple. Again and again God has sent us prophets as messengers telling us of God's generosity and our responsibility.

Amos, in the 8th century B.C.E., speaks for God when saying:

*I hate, I despise your feasts,...
I will not accept your sacrifices...
But let justice roll down like waters,
And righteousness like a mighty stream.¹*

And Hosea, also the 8th century B.C.E., is God's voice saying:

*For I desire mercy and not sacrifice,
Attachment to God rather than burnt offerings.²*

And Isaiah in the 8th century B.C.E. pleads for God

*To the thirsty bring water,
Meet the fugitive with bread...
For they have fled from the swords,
From the drawn sword,
from the bent bow,
And from the press of battle.*

And Micah, also in the 8th century, tells us this:

*And what does the Lord require of you
But to do justice, and to love kindness,
And to walk humbly with your God?³*

There is no ambiguity among the prophets sent by God to the tenants of this creation. And if you look closely at every major world religion you will find the same fundamental message. God doesn't need us to keep certain rituals, tenets, or memberships. God needs us to be generous, compassionate and just with the children of every age and every nation.

The tenants can misbehave so badly that Jesus asks in the parable, "Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?" and the hearers answer, "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."

God has every right to "kill the miserable lot" and even tried the that approach once, you remember, when the world was flooded and only Noah and his family survived. Whether this is

¹ Amos 5:21-24

² Hosea 6:6

³ Micah 6:6-8

material history or spiritual history doesn't really matter because either way God's decision is that destruction does not heal the world and God makes a promise with the rainbow to not go this way again.

Instead, God chooses to love even the wicked tenants. God chooses to take the rejected and murdered prophets, to take the death of Jesus, and make a new vineyard, a new house, a better building on which the justice and compassion of the prophets and Jesus are the cornerstone. God chooses forgiveness over retribution, generosity over starvation, and a new life for whoever will receive it; a life that is filled with a generosity inspired joy. God is a God of love, of forgiveness, compassion and justice.

I am reminded of the title of one of John Ortberg's books "Love beyond Reason."⁴ God is the God who when we think we deserve to be killed and the garden leased to new, more responsible tenants, continues to "love beyond reason."

And so having heard this parable, and perhaps seeing something of ourselves in it, we too have a choice. We can choose to be selfish with the gifts God has given us, or we can choose to be loving stewards of God's grace, our garden. We can choose to amass and hoard what has been given to us in our barns for fear of tomorrow, or we can share our abundance.

It is our choice and how we choose matters to every child that rises hungry and goes to sleep starving. Our choice matters to the joy of our heart and soul. How we choose to use the God given gifts of which we are stewards matters for our joy and the healing of the world.

Shalom and Amen.

⁴ John Ortberg, Love Beyond Reason: Moving God's love from your head to your heart, (Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 1998) A terrific book in our church library.