

A sermon preached at Trinity Episcopal Church, Wethersfield, CT
October 4, 2020 by The Rt. Rev. Gordon P. Scruton
Proper 22 A. Isaiah 5:1-7. Psalm 80:7-14. Philippians 3:4b-14. Matthew 21: 33-46

Jesus loved to tell stories to communicate his message. In today's Gospel, Jesus tells a parable with an important Creation theme. Jesus said: Once upon a time there was a farmer who planted a vineyard. He prepared the soil carefully, fertilized it, planted good seed in it. He put up a fence to protect it from animals. He built, not just a shack, but a tower in which tenants could live as they cared for and protected this vineyard. Then he hired some tenant farmers to care for the vineyard—while he went to another country.

When harvest time came, the tenants were expected to give the fruits of the vineyard to the owner, who would in turn pay the tenants. But when harvest time came, the tenants beat or killed everyone the owner sent to collect the fruits from the vineyard. Notice how patient the owner was. He kept trusting the tenants to do the right thing, and they never did. Finally they even killed the owners' son, foolishly thinking that having killed the heir, they would be the owners of the vineyard. They would control all the fruits and profits for themselves.

Like the people who listened to Jesus tell this story, we know what it feels like to expect a return on our investment. If we pay someone to do a job, we want it done well and at the price we agreed on. Those who listened to Jesus tell this story were eager to punish those selfish and violent tenants for their lack of respect for the generous owner.

There are many ways in which we can interpret parables. From one perspective, Jesus was reminding us and his original hearers, that God is our Creator. God has given us the blessings of life, abilities, opportunities, resources. God gave us these gifts so that, as we live in loving relationship with God and our neighbors, we would produce for God the fruit God created us to produce. As God said through the prophet Micah: "what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with your God." God watches to see if we human beings are producing that kind return on God's investment in our lives.

Perhaps the key question of the parable was: Who is in charge? Who is the owner and who is a tenant accountable to the owner? This is the crucial question for every person, every parish, every nation on this planet that God so lovingly created. We answer it many times a day in the ways we think, speak and act. Am I in charge, working to get what I want right now? Or am I allowing God to be in charge of my life, guiding me to be a good tenant or steward the life and resources as God put in my care?

This is question especially appropriate to consider in this Season of Creation. Our society too often treats the earth, rivers and oceans, animals, the air we breathe as if we were the owners of all these things.

The Parable reminds us that God is the Creator and owner of all creation. We are merely tenants, created to be good stewards of God's gift of creation. How is your life and my life impacting God's creation every day? In what ways might we, like the tenants, be taking more for

ourselves from Creation without thinking of our Creator and our neighbors? In what little ways might we be supporting and sustaining God's creation out of loving gratitude to God and loving care for the generations that will follow us?

The parable concludes with a sobering reality: Jesus says, in the end, we will all be accountable to our Creator for our stewardship of God's Creation. God will hold us accountable as individuals, as businesses, as nations... for our care of...or our destruction of God's Creation. This sobering accountability becomes very personal for all of us whenever we cast a vote in local or national elections.

At this time in history we have some individuals, businesses and nations that are working hard to care for God's creation as part of their regular practices and policies. And we have some individuals, businesses and nations operating as if they are the owners of creation and can do whatever they want to make a profit, regardless of its destructive impact on God's creation and human beings. You and I have the opportunity and responsibility before our Creator to be faithful tenants who do our research and vote for leaders and policies that demonstrate our stewardship and care for God's creation and for the people and animals God created to live on this planet.

Who is the owner and who is the tenant? Jesus asks this question about every area of our lives. Jesus is our example. As we heard last week in the 2nd chapter of Paul's letter to the Philippians, when Jesus came to earth and was born of Mary, Jesus emptied himself of all his prerogatives, all his entitlement as the Cosmic Christ who created the universe. Jesus became a servant, a tenant on God's planet earth. He experienced great suffering, injustice and death as a result of always saying and doing the will of his Father in Heaven. And God raised him from the dead and returned him to God's right hand in heaven because of his faithful, sacrificial service in this world. Jesus modeled what it means to live like a tenant in service of God and neighbors, instead of trying to be in control and get everything we can for ourselves.

Today the church invites us to remember and give thanks to God for the life of Francis of Assisi. St Francis is one of the most loved saints, respected by people of all religions and no religion because of the way he embodied love for God and for the poorest and most marginalized of God's beloved people in his time; the way he worked for peace and reconciliation amid the conflicts of his time; by the way he saw himself as a joyful friend and brother to all of God's creation.

One aspect of Francis' life we don't often focus on, which helped him identify as a tenant and not as an owner, was his full embrace of poverty. Francis could have clung to his entitlements as the son of a wealthy cloth merchant in Assisi. Instead he heard Jesus say blessed are the poor. Francis realized that clinging to money, possessions, status was actually dangerous. It made people feel like they were in control and were better than others who were poorer. He recognized that we can easily begin to love and serve the perks and pleasures of money and possessions as the driving priorities of our lives.

In contrast, a life of poverty or humility, recognizes with gratitude that we are totally dependent on God for everything and every moment our lives. God is the owner of all and we are God's servants and tenants. We are placed here to love and serve God and our neighbors and all creation as ourselves. While Francis took poverty literally and gave away all that he had, Francis did not insist that everyone has to be as radical as he was. Like Jesus, he did call people to constantly recognize their dependence on and responsibility to God and to live with humility, generosity and simplicity so that they could make the love and service of God, neighbors and creation the greatest love and controlling priority of their lives.

We have all learned the wisdom of Jesus' parable by our own experience of how good life can be, even in difficult times, when we let go of trying to be in control and allow God to be in control. By contrast, we have also experienced that when we try to be in control and insist that we get our own way, things do not go well. We make ourselves and others miserable. Joy and peace and fulfillment come for us and for others when we seek to love as Jesus loved and help all our neighbors find joy and fulfillment as sisters and brothers in God's creation.

So this week, how can you and I think and speak and act more like good tenants in God's world ...instead of ignoring God and acting like we are the owners, in charge of life?

We could begin each day as Jesus taught us, with the Lord's prayer...saying something like: Today, O God, help me to live as your faithful servant in all my thoughts, words and actions. May thy kingdom come, thy will be done in my life today, as it is in heaven.

We could pause for a couple minutes around noon and again before we go to bed, to ask Jesus to help us see the ways in which we've been thinking, acting and speaking as a master today, insisting on being in control ...and in what ways we have listened for God's guidance and lived lovingly as God's servant today.

Don't be too hard on yourself. As St. Paul said in today's epistle, none of us will ever arrive at perfection as followers of Jesus. But Paul said he keeps pressing on, in both good times and difficult times, pressing on to live as the person God created him to be as a tenant or servant in God's creation. It's not easy. There are no shortcuts. It's a one day at a time, life-long quest to keep becoming more and more the kind of people God created us to become. How will you keep pressing on toward this goal every day this week?

Let's close our eyes, be still and talk with Jesus about how we might make this the focus of our lives this week...

O Lord, make us instruments of your peace. Where there is hatred, let us sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is discord, union; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair hope, where there is darkness, light, where there is sadness, joy. Grant that we may not so much seek to be consoled as to console; to be understood as to understand; to be loved as to love. For it is in giving that we receive; it is in pardoning that we are pardoned; and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life. Amen.