

## Whose Vineyard Is This, Anyway?

<sup>33</sup> 'Listen to another parable. There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a wine press in it, and built a watchtower. Then he leased it to tenants and went to another country. <sup>34</sup>When the harvest time had come, he sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his produce. <sup>35</sup>But the tenants seized his slaves and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. <sup>36</sup>Again he sent other slaves, more than the first; and they treated them in the same way. <sup>37</sup>Finally he sent his son to them, saying, "They will respect my son." <sup>38</sup>But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, "This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance." <sup>39</sup>So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him. <sup>40</sup>Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?' <sup>41</sup>They said to him, '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.' <sup>42</sup>Jesus said to them, 'Have you never read in the scriptures: "The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord's doing, and it is amazing in our eyes"?' <sup>43</sup>Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom. <sup>44</sup>The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls.' <sup>45</sup>When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they realized that he was speaking about them. <sup>46</sup>They wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowds, because they regarded him as a prophet.

—Matthew 21:33-46

I'm sure you already know the context for this story, but it might help to review a little. After Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, he makes a scourge and drives the money-changers out of the temple. Predictable, the people in charge are unhappy about it. The next time Jesus enters the temple courtyard, they demand that he state the basis of his authority to run around creating chaos in an otherwise orderly operation. Jesus embarks on an explanation that uses three parables to clarify his position, and this story is the second of the three.

I have to admit, this story is a violent and sad. When we read stories like this, we're often not too sure what to do with them. Of course, we can probably figure out that the earliest interpretation of this story, one that seems almost explicit in the text, is that this parable is an allegory, a story in which each of the characters represents someone else. The landowner must be God; that seems quite obvious. The son, therefore, must be

Jesus. The servants that are sent early in the story to collect the rent on behalf of the landowner, well, they're the prophets God sent to the people of Israel, and that means that the wicked tenants in the story must be the people of Israel themselves. What a relief--it doesn't seem to be about us!

There's absolutely no doubt that Matthew had much of this in mind when he wrote this down in the first place. The impression he gives is that Israel has forfeited the privilege of being the chosen people. He'd like us to believe that from now on, the part of the Chosen People will be played by the Christians, a group made up of a more cosmopolitan collection of people. From Matthew's point of view, a change of cast is necessary because of the way the Israelites were treating the people God sent them to call them to do what was right. Certainly, Matthew is entitled to his opinion. At least, though, Matthew is talking about the Israelites, and even then, he means the ones during the time of Jesus, and not even all of them, just the leaders. He isn't really saying anything about us. After all, we're not even Jewish, and we don't live anywhere near Israel.

On the other hand, who did we say would now be playing the role of God's people?

Since it's abundantly clear that the new tenants will have to do something that the old tenants didn't do, or at least not do something the old tenants did do, it might be a good idea for us to look a little more closely at the contract.

The old tenants were people who really liked being in charge of the vineyard. They liked it so well that they didn't want the landlord doing anything to spoil their fun, like turning over a hefty chunk of the harvest. Suppose the vineyard represents the Kingdom of God, which might have looked a lot like Israel to the priests and Pharisees, but which might look very different to us today. My own definition of "The Kingdom of God" seems to hold up under the scrutiny of this story: the Kingdom of God is what

the world would be like if everyone lived under God's sovereignty. As Jesus speaks of the Kingdom, we recognize that he isn't talking about a physical kingdom, but rather lifting up a vision of what the world could be like, and what the world is like in those rare moments where the Kingdom erupts in our midst. We can use the model to describe almost any aspect of our lives: the Kingdom of God may be the model for our congregation, or our family life, perhaps our workplace, perhaps some other organization you belong to, maybe even an avocation or a cause that you pursue in your spare time. In fact, think of all those things as smaller municipalities within the larger idea of "Kingdom of God," and you'll begin to get the idea of which vineyard these new tenants are getting ready to occupy.

One of the important things the old tenants couldn't seem to get through their heads was the idea that no matter how much they loved being in charge of the vineyard, it didn't belong to them. The landowner, whom we have said represents God in the story, isn't making unfair or unrealistic demands; God is always the king of the Kingdom. No matter what the tenants do or how they behave, nothing changes the fact that they are not the owners--they're still responsible to someone else, and they'll have to make sure they satisfy that someone else if they're going to remain in charge. The Kingdom of God does indeed have a glass ceiling: none of the managers will ever rise to the level of CEO.

That raises a fairly important question: what does the owner expect from the managers? In the case of a vineyard, I think it's safe to say that the managers are expected to produce fruit, since otherwise the whole metaphor would fall apart. I'll bet you already have some idea of the meaning of the image "bearing fruit" in traditional Christian biblical interpretation. For Matthew, especially, this is the phrase that describes the activity of God's people: bearing fruit is engaging in ministry. Bearing

fruit is reflecting the grace you have received into your immediate community. Bearing fruit is deliberately growing in your faith, both internally (that is, doing things to make your own faith stronger) and externally (that is, doing things to express God's love to others).

As I was thinking about these things, my wonderful wife brought me a cup of coffee. Just one of many ways she lets me know that she loves me, and I'm very grateful. I said, "You're better to me than I deserve." She said, "If God says we should love one another, then deserving doesn't have much to do with it." And I say, thank God for that. It's an important point about bearing fruit, and one that the tenants would have done well to remember: we don't bear fruit in the form of good works to the people around us because they deserve it. We bear fruit because it's what the landowner asks of us.

Maybe where the tenants went wrong is that they forgot why they were there...they liked being in charge of the vineyard so much that they forgot who owned it and what it was for. Maybe they liked the comfortable routine of the vineyard, or the social connections they made at the vineyard, or maybe they just enjoyed telling all their friends that they had a vineyard. Did it give them a feeling of power? Did it give them a feeling of accomplishment? Were they just greedy, wanting to keep all the profits for themselves? Jesus seems to indicate that greed was at least a factor, but I can't help but think that maybe all of these things were in play. Knowing as we do that Jesus was speaking to the priests and leaders in the temple, it seems clear that Jesus believes they aren't using their leadership responsibilities for the betterment of the Kingdom of God, but instead to help themselves to the benefits of the temple--not only the material benefits, but also the benefits of power and influence.

Well, we're not in charge of anything, are we? Actually, we are, although sometimes

we don't see it that way. We're still responsible for our own little manifestation of the Kingdom of God. We have a territory, the sum of all the aspects of our lives over which we have some control. No matter what else may be going on around me, I'm still responsible for how I relate to my family, my friends, my church, my workplace, my life— even if I hold no office and serve on no committee, I still have a section of the Kingdom for which I am responsible. The question we have to ask ourselves is this: are we committed to making that within our spheres of influence comfortable for us, or are we committed to making it bear fruit for the kingdom of God?

In the end, this story gives us plenty to think about, and plenty of good news. The king is still in charge of the Kingdom; what a relief! Our own role is clearly defined: we are tenants, managers, who owe it to the landowner to bear fruit. We can use our imaginations to see what that might look like: in our relationship with the church, do our lives bear fruit for the Kingdom? What about in our families? What about in our work places? What about in our own interior life? Do we bear fruit? Now imagine that each of us is bearing fruit, just in those places where we have some influence...just in those places where we can set the agenda. What if the edges of all those spheres were to bump up against each other? What if they were to overlap and intermingle, and we were all to remember that God is the owner?

Why, I'd say that would look a lot like the Kingdom of God.