

**October 8, 2017 – Twenty-seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time
“Remember – this is Our Church!”**

**Rev. Dr. Scott Landis
Isaiah 5:1-7; Matthew 21:33-46**

This Sunday we come to the final of three parables offered by Jesus in response to the chief priests and elders' question, "By what authority do you do these things?"

You may remember the sequence of events. Jesus recently arrived in Jerusalem, was hailed as the Messiah – a king – on that celebratory day we call Palm Sunday. Shortly thereafter he went on a rampage in his attempts to purify the temple – much to the shock and anger of the religious leaders. They were baffled. How could he really be who he said he was and do such sacrilegious things? And so they questioned him. They questioned his authority. They questioned his tactics. They questioned his reasoning and rationale as they sought to maintain order. In fact, what they really wanted to do was arrest him, but they feared the reaction of the crowds who regarded him as a prophet.

So, while they were all off-kilter, Jesus challenged them with another parable, the one oft times referred to as the *Parable of the Wicked Tenants*.

It's a puzzling parable which most scholars try to interpret allegorically – that is, where each character in the story is equated with a modern-day parallel – or someone obvious to the hearers of the story. In this case the landowner would be God, who created the world for the benefit of humankind (that would be the wicked tenants). But it was clear to God that humanity did not take care of what they were given on behalf of the owner. Instead of sharing and offering the fruit of their labor to the landowner, they wanted it all for themselves. So they devised a scheme to get it all.

The landowner (God) sends some servants (interpreted allegorically – the prophets, teachers, and God-ordained leaders) to collect the produce. The tenants, in turn, beat them up, throw them out, stone them, or kill them outright. So the landowner sends in additional servants resulting in the same fate.

Now, it is unclear whether the landowner knows what happened to the others he sent – not having the methods of communication we have today. All he knows is that the ones he sent did not return with the produce. So, in a final gesture of goodwill, he sends his son (presumably Jesus – again given this method of interpretation) thinking, surely they would listen to him and have respect for him. But the tenants respond unexpectedly. They reason if they get rid of the heir, the vineyard would be theirs outright. They would have it all for themselves. Their goal would be achieved, and they would grab all the proceeds.

All of this might sound vaguely familiar to you. In broad brush strokes this is the essence of the biblical story and may well have been Jesus' way of foreshadowing his own fate. That in itself is enough for the parable to be included in the biblical text and is a plausible explanation and lesson even for today. But I'm the kind of preacher that whenever I see something so very obvious, I usually think there just might be a little bit more going on. See if you don't agree.

In doing some further study on this parable, I came across one writer who invited readers to bring this challenging story out of the macro level of the entire biblical chronology and instead, focus on the church – in general or in specific. In other words, to change our perspective a bit so the larger story becomes OUR story.

If we do that, God remains in the role of the landowner, and Jesus is still the son, but WE become the tenants and the vineyard is the church – our church. Consider that for a moment and see if you can relate.

We each feel a little differently about our church. When I ask folks to talk about or to describe our church I get quite a few different responses typically based on what is most important to the individual member:

- Place of radical hospitality – welcome – inclusion
- Center for outreach – mission – service – and focusing on justice and witness
- Center for spiritual formation and development – a place of worship and where I most closely connect to and interact with God
- Community of friends – safe place of fellowship and wholesome activity
- Place to learn more about the bible – for adults and children
- A meeting place for church program and for community events

You might add many of your own expressions of what church is to you or its importance to you, but what I want to challenge you with is that the church is MORE than this list – no matter how long. You see, I believe, the church is something with which we are entrusted and given responsibility for a season. We are stewards of this organization we call church – to nurture, to serve, and to leave in better shape than it was when we came here. [Pause]

When I was first called to this congregation as pastor I attended a series of “cottage meetings” in members' homes. They were informal “meet and greet” sessions that began with snacks and beverages and then a time for me to ask a few questions of those gathered. I don't remember all the questions, but I do remember asking at least two:

1. How would you describe Mission Hills United Church of Christ?
2. What is your hope or dream for the church over the next several years?

I received valuable information through those gatherings that guided a lot of my thinking and planning in those early days of my tenure. On one evening, a member said something that really startled me at the time. It was a comment I have never forgotten.

We were going around the circle and folks were introducing themselves and then one individual looked me in the eyes and said to me, “Just remember, preachers come and go, but this is OUR church!” It felt like I was getting my marching orders.

I don’t remember exactly how I responded. I’m sure I was diplomatic, but I was a little stunned by what I interpreted as a way for me to make sure I knew my place in this strong “congregational” congregation.

As I processed that comment later, I was struck both by its wisdom and its folly. It is true. Preachers come and go. We know that. We know we are employed by the congregation and can be removed from office just as quickly as we are installed. And we know we are “called” to “serve.” Of that we can never forget. That was the wisdom in the statement and a reality that every preacher must always keep in mind as we try our best to fulfill our ministry.

But if any of us really believe that this is “OUR church” we can quite easily fall into the trap of the tenants in Jesus’ parable. The word “Our” implies possession – ownership – and the implied rights that come along with having it for ourselves.

You see the tenants of the vineyard wanted fully to possess the land and reap all the benefits – the proceeds of the vineyard with no regard for the rightful owner. Churches too often succumb to the same fate. “This is our church” quickly degenerates into a more general internal focus and a consumer mentality that begins and ends with “what’s in this for me.” It’s a mentality that is insidious and hardly ever recognized by the ones who espouse it.

Just think of how differently the vineyard would have been treated if the tenants thought of themselves as stewards – ones called by the owner to nurture – care for – serve – and leave it in a better way than when they arrived?

Just think of how differently the church would be – if we related in the same way – that we were called by God (just like preachers) and that we were given the responsibility to care for it – nurture it – serve it – and leave it better than we found it.

Just like I imagine the tenants expected to receive a portion of the proceeds, we likewise might expect to receive the benefit of service – to and from us – during our season of responsible management. But ultimately, it is not OUR church.

That's precisely why Jesus called out the chief priests and the elders – not by their names, but by their actions. They had become so enmeshed in the institution that they held so tightly in their hands, wanting to do everything in their power to own, possess, and guard it from any outside influence – and certainly against any change.

If we think of “our” church in that way – we leave very little room for growth, possibility, or new perspectives. But if we think of our church in terms of our being stewards of it – the possibilities are endless.

Jesus invites us into that kind of service – and welcomes us into that form of joyful response as we intentionally engage in his body – the church.

What a blessing it is to be a part of that body. What a challenge and a gift to truly “Be the church.”

Amen.