

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ!

I suppose that over the years, Cindy and I have rented homes at least a dozen times in about as many states. We always regarded renting a home as a matter of trust; we trusted that whoever we were renting from would take care of their part of our rental agreement, and we always felt that we had to leave the rental in at least as good a shape as we took it, if not better. We always left on good terms, always willing to recommend the homes and their owners to others. We were stewards of the property we were leasing.

Now our gospel this morning is a story about stewardship, an agreement between tenants and an owner. You make a commitment, you keep a commitment, pretty simple to someone who has rented a lot of property over the years.

Our gospel this morning is also a parable. A story, not a factual account of a rental agreement gone awry. Jesus does not give us a lot of detail, but we really do not need a lot of detail. This is about a vineyard. Now coming from northern California, I have seen a lot of vineyards, I've met vineyard owners. In some respects I suppose you could say that this might be a lesson for how not to do a business plan if you are going to plant a vineyard, but the purpose of this story is a little different from that. We hear about a landowner, a fairly ordinary story, nothing special.

But listen carefully or you may miss that this story is a metaphor for Jesus' own story, for what we read in the Old Testament, and in the gospels. In this parable, think of the landowner as God, God the Creator, who created the heavens and the earth. This story gives us a simplified version of what the Father has done. We know some of what God has done from the book of Genesis, including giving this land to the original tenants, Adam and Eve. God appointed them to be over his creation, to steward it. He gave it to them and their descendants, but it is still his creation. For all our talk of ownership and how I did this and she did that, and we built this, and we are worth this much, it is all still God's. Just the facts, brothers and sisters, just the facts. It is really pretty simple. God owns everything, including you and me, and we are his tenants, his stewards.

I mentioned a moment ago that this is a metaphor for much of the OT. God repeatedly sent his prophets to the people of Israel. Isaiah, Jeremiah, Elijah, Elisha, Micah, Hosea, the list goes on. Yet the people did not listen, they heard but they not listen. Instead they engaged in rebellion against God, oh, maybe it was not open rebellion, but sin is sin is sin and when you are willfully going your own way, ignoring God's word, and his messengers, well maybe that is open rebellion after all. So God sent his Son, the "only-begotten from the Father," as we read in John 1:14, thinking they will respect him. And Jesus is the son in our parable, in our story. And the son, Jesus, comes after unsuccessful attempts to get the tenants to listen.

All this takes place on Jesus' way to the cross. Jesus knows he came from God, that he is going back to God and he is telling us a story about it.

A simple story, not because we are simple, a simple story because Jesus has a simple message. God did not give up on the Israelites, he does not give up on us. No matter how many times we get it wrong, no matter how many times we do not listen to his messengers, God still loves us and continues to reach out to us even now. Yet when we reject the capstone, the cornerstone, when we kill the landowner's son, God surprises us because he takes that rejection and makes it part of a stronger foundation than we can ever imagine. A foundation and a structure made of love. The love of God.

So think now about the vineyard. What does a vineyard produce? Grapes of course. Fruit. Aaahhhh. God loves us so much that he sent his Son, that all who believe in him may not perish. We believe in God's Son, we are saved by faith in God's Son, the story continues. Vineyards produce fruit, God expects and wants us, you and me, to produce fruit.

This is life, life that comes from faith, faith that is lived out with commitment. Life that comes from knowing where your treasure is. Life that produces fruit. There is a lot of commitment when it comes to the Vikings, the Twins, to hunting and fishing, to work or retirement, to living on or near the lakes here in this part of Minnesota. Is there a lot of commitment when it comes to church, to stewardship to living a life that bears fruit for the kingdom? Sometimes we seem a bit unwilling to accept God's authority over us, we have a desire to work for ourselves and keep all that we produce as the fruit of our labors. Messengers from God come with the authority of the landowner but are often seen as threats to the lives or lifestyles of those they come to, and even more ominous, to economic life. Messengers from God seem to want to take away what tenants assume is their own reward, fruit that stems from their own efforts. Now you have heard a story, a parable this morning. But it is also a metaphor, for life then, for life now. But, the story we are living is not a metaphor, it is not a fairy tale either. The "happily ever after" part is not going to take place in most of our lifetimes.

I moved back to Minnesota just a couple months before the elections in 2008. The economic situation in our country, indeed, the world, was pretty dire. Banks and investment firms failing, mortgage companies collapsing, homes being foreclosed upon, major corporations, two of our big three car manufacturers for example, needing bailout funds. Pension and retirement funds tanked, property values went down across the country and in some areas have not recovered. Jobs were scarce then and maybe a bit better now. Talk in Washington was toxic then and even more poisonous now. And we as a congregation and as individuals were not exempt. Things were scary. Still are for that matter.

My first sermon here at Trinity, I told you I preach Christ crucified and I preach about discipleship, which includes stewardship. And I continue to talk about them, and encourage you to do the same, and to demonstrate them in your lives.

When close to 3 billion people in the world live on less than \$2 per day, when we have record levels of people at the poverty level in our own country. When we hear about poverty and the housing crisis in our own neck of the woods, we need to consider carefully what it means to live lives that produce fruit.

Frankly it is not about giving a tithe to the church, giving back to God a portion of what is ours because the truth is that none of it, none of what we have if ours. It is all God's. We are tenants, stewards, charged with the care of creation and each other, charged with sharing the love of God with one another and with those outside our walls.

Jesus was anointed to bring good news to the poor, he has anointed us to do the same. To produce fruit. We are the Body of Christ here on earth even as we are his stewards. We're making progress on our Second Mile campaign, we are not quite so successful on our giving to the general fund that pays for lights, heat, plowing snow, and salaries. We have commitments and the need has not gone away. Not even close.

When the landowner comes back, I pray that we will be found working for the ends of the Kingdom. By restoring some of what we have lost so we can support our ministry partners more fully, by getting even more engaged in mission beyond our walls, so we can be better stewards of God's creation. The fruit we produce can make this world a better place for each of God's beloved children. AMEN