

**PARK HILL UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
WORLD COMMUNION SUNDAY
REV. JOHN L. THOMPSON
TENANCY AND OWNERSHIP
Matthew 21:33-43
October 2, 2011
9:00 & 11:00 A.M. SERVICES**

Jesus told this parable to emphasize the importance of being good stewards of whatever God has put in our hands. Success is based on making the best use of what we have that will benefit the kingdom of God. Inevitably we will lose those things we try to keep or invest only in ourselves. You can gain the world and lose your soul. As followers of Christ, we are expected to demonstrate a distinctive quality of life that defines fulfillment differently from the world.

In a caste, people know their places, and are expected to accept them. In a class-less society, theoretically, the sky is the limit. In creation, however, there is a simple, unchanging distinction between Creator and creature. As human creatures, many things are possible for us, but we cannot usurp the place of God our Creator.

Children learn amazingly early about ownership, and one of the first words in their vocabulary is “**Mine!**” The quantity or value of a person’s possessions is the universal way of measuring success. Private ownership has always been a part of the American dream and the larger one’s net worth the greater one’s power and prestige. Wealth and ownership concerns are behind essentially every war and act of treachery in human history.

Tenancy is the temporary possession or holding of something, such as a field or a house that belongs to another. Tenant farming is something the twenty-first century and the first century have in common. Here is how it works. A portion of land suitable for farming is owned by someone who lives elsewhere; perhaps in another state. The land belongs to one person, but that person cannot care for it, cultivate it, or produce crops on it. The commute would be impossible! A farmer who lives near the land in question needs land for growing crops. An arrangement is made whereby the farmer becomes a tenant and uses the land as if it were his own. A contract will exist between the owner and the tenant farmer, so that both

sides benefit from this arrangement. The owner of the land may live so far away that he only comes to see the land once a year. The tenant farmer, who works the land on a daily basis, will become intimately familiar with it and will naturally feel more and more as if he were the owner of the land. It is imperative, however, that he never stop thinking like a tenant. He is constantly responsible for the land, and will benefit from its bounty, but the land is not his. It belongs to another, who will have the last word.

Tenancy is thought to involve more responsibility than ownership. What master could possibly be more lenient with you than you yourself? But owners have their own pressures and responsibilities. Then, too, some individuals are naturally driven and have higher expectations of themselves. Tenants often find a certain relief in knowing exactly what the owner expects of them.

In his ministry, Jesus relied heavily on parables. He used parables so often that his disciples inquired about it. As a rule, a parable makes a single point. Allegories, on the other hand, are so filled with symbolic meanings that almost every character or object stand for something. *Gulliver's Travels* is an allegory. A parable tends to have a single meaning. Sometimes, however, a parable of Jesus may be more like an allegory, and this is true of today's parable.

Almost everything in this story represents something a first-century Jewish audience would understand. Our Old Testament lesson for today has Isaiah describing the nation of Israel as "***the vineyard of the Lord of hosts,***" and saying that the people of Judah are God's "***pleasant planting.***" Many of us have never seen a vineyard, but Jesus' hearers were very familiar with how a vineyard is built. The tenants of the vineyard would be seen as the rulers of Israel, and the servants would have been understood to be the prophets of God. The son in the parable represents Jesus. In rejecting the son and the servants (prophets), the tenants (rulers) have spurned the authority of the owner (God). Because the tenants started acting like owners, they were punished and the vineyard was turned over to new tenants. Jesus is saying that the rulers of Israel cannot assume ownership of the nation and its people. They are responsible to God for all they do. God will not tolerate insubordination and betrayal.

The beauty and wisdom of the Bible is nowhere more apparent than in the opening chapters of Genesis. Far more than the story of creation, this narrative reveals the divine plan for how we are to live in the midst of creation. God created a world and took delight in it, praising it as good. Between God and God's creation, we are uniquely placed. We are not God, but we are made in God's

image. Because we are created in the image of God, we have responsibilities for creation, as care-taker, steward, overseer, protector. In the language of Jesus' parable we are tenants. This means at least two things: First, we are not the owners of creation. Second, we are not without responsibility for creation.

What could be more basic to human life in God's world than the care of the earth? One of the first responsibilities God gave us in creation was the naming of all the other creatures of the earth. Naming rights imply serious responsibilities. Humankind was given dominion over God's creatures, which surely included protecting and caring for them. We were given a garden. And how are we doing with it? Some of us have related to creation as if it was inexhaustible, but we are learning that it is not. Some of us have related to creation as if it was indestructible, but we are learning that it is not. Some of us have related to creation almost exclusively as consumers, users, and private owners. Too many of us have compromised the great potential with which we were made and our goals have become mundane, superficial, and egocentric. Too often those to whom we have given power have had neither the character nor the wisdom to perceive themselves as tenants in a creation that belongs to God.

This allegorical story is a parable of judgment for those who do not accept the responsibilities of a tenant. It encapsulates a pattern in Israel's history down to and including the time of Christ. God sends prophets and the religious leaders put them to death. God sends more prophets, and the result is the same. God sends even his Son and the leaders of Israel take his life as well. Jesus concludes with a denunciation that should frighten all who have ever claimed citizenship in the kingdom of God: ***“The kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to the people who produce the fruits of the kingdom.” (21:43)***

Identity issues are a part of growing up. There are many aspects of a person's identity. We all have a family identity first, and this becomes the foundation for other discoveries about ourselves. Spiritually and theological, each of us is a child of God and a follower of Jesus Christ. In the most comprehensive sense, however, we are God's care-takers of creation. This was the vocation given to Adam and Eve. If you think you are on the verge of understanding what that is all about, I would love to be your pastor. I would love for this to be your church.