

# Pastor Ken's Sermon

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**SERMON – 18<sup>TH</sup> PENTECOST  
MATTHEW 21:33-46  
OCTOBER 4, 2020**

## **“EVICTED...NO, RECREATED”**

I've laid my head down in quite a few places in my life. I've owned a single-family home, a townhouse, lived in three church-owned parsonages, been a renter of an apartment and a duplex, and even spent a winter in a FEMA trailer. I've slept in a tent, a yurt, in the back seat of my car, and in more hotel /motel rooms than I can count. Throw in a couple of trans-Atlantic overnight flights, a cruise up the Alaskan coast and a night or two perched against the wall of a ferry crossing Lake Victoria and you can add airplane and ship to the list. Johnny Cash one famously sang "*I've been everywhere Man*" ... I think I've slept just about everywhere man.

My present abode is a condominium. It's a nice place but I've learned that condo owners are really sort of owner/renters. Seems you own everything on the inside of the walls and your association owns pretty much everything outside those walls. I've run afoul of some of their regulations. Chastened (as well as fined), I now know that regarding the ground under and around my place I'm just a tenant!

Our Lord Jesus teaches us today by way of a parable about a landowner and his tenants a lesson which is more or less a re-telling of Isaiah 5:1-7. It's convenient to assume both are about Israel not living up to their covenant with God and so are replaced – the church being the “new tenants.” We could then just zip right by this story and say it has little or no relevance to me.

Jesus never tells stories so easily contained I'm afraid. Just as I made the mistake of assuming a few little “independent decisions” about the grounds immediately surrounding my current residence would be ok, (in fact a significant and long overdue improvement) our Lord speaks to folks who find living under any sort of perceived “restriction” in their behavior objectionable. Jesus tells of a vineyard owner who “planted, put, dug, built...and leased.” Isaiah tells us the landowner wonders “*what more could I have done for my vineyard?*” That has elicited over the years no small amount of theological speculation as to whether God could have created a better world than this one. It could have been designed with more creature comfort and convenience for example – what possible good is there in sub-zero temperatures after all, unless you work for Land's End?

You'd be excused if you said “*well, he could have kept it for himself and either kept others out of it or done better at vetting the ones he let into it.*” But that is not the nature of God – the nature of God is to include humans in his creation in the most unique and consequential way. These stories in Isaiah and Matthew, whilst seemingly about the faithlessness of Israel, are instead about the faithfulness of God. They channel the story of creation to a ‘T’ – what more could God have done for those whom he created in his image?

Concerning creation Theologian Paul Hinlicky of Roanoke College in Virginia wrote that, when in Genesis 1:31 God saw his whole creation and declared it ‘*very good*’, it was not so much that the place itself was beautiful or diverse, but that in humans God had someone to share in the care, use and enjoyment of creation. He wrote “the human gift and task is what God calls “*very good*”, not just the pristine conditions at it's origin. It was the “joint endeavor” that was “*very good*”. Very good however implies a clear-headed understanding of who owns what, and who merely occupies. If I learned anything from all the places I've laid my head for a night, it's that they are temporary – even if I own it, I won't forever. A very good lesson my mother taught me was that when you leave a room, leave it in the condition you found it. I've taken that to heart, even as my family has with considerable exasperation, had to remind me that does not necessarily apply to motel rooms... *Dad you can leave the towel on the floor and a bed unmade.*

Here is the point I wish to make – God calls us to participate fully, and consequently in His creation. That right belongs to the entire human family ... but came in a particular way to a small branch of that family called Israel, into which a vine called the Christian church was grafted. The Parable of the Vineyard in Matthew may be a bit of an exercise in hyperbole – our Lord could sure tell a story and seriously, what sane person would think that as a tenant they have the right to anything, much less everything they do not own or that by violence they could secure that right and even attain ownership? That's just nuts! Right?

Yet in our use of a common creation and a personal body we occupy for a time but do not own, we have read into God's creation covenant in Genesis 1 fine print that *"just ain't there."* We like the tenants known as ancient Israel, read *"increase and multiply"* as giving us the right to *"accumulate and dominate"* as though it was our effort and not God's gracious good creation that gave the increase. And if the content and tone of civic conversations is our guide, we've added *"humiliate and berate"* those tenants we don't like to our list of squatter's rights. Sour grapes indeed!

Our creation story tells us one thing quite clearly - God put us on this earth to enjoy its blessings, but also to see to it those blessings are justly distributed which is precisely *how* we give gratitude to the Blessor. Trying to rewrite the lease agreement as our lessons from Isaiah and Matthew suggest just won't do. It may bring with it a heady sense of freedom, but these commentaries on Genesis 1 known as the parables of the Vineyard tell us there will be a day when the owner will inspect his premises – and knows the condition He left it in. It was... *"very good."*

Which is precisely why a rather passionate tenant named Paul discovered in his Creator's Son Jesus – the heir who was killed, who Paul himself actually may have had a hand in killing, not his eviction but his *"re-creation"*. It is why everything he may have once called a *"profit"* he considered a loss – worthless, compared to the greatness of knowing Jesus. The parable(s) of the vineyards, as parables tend to do, leave us wondering where we show up in them and *"what do we do once we find out."*

Paul helps us, immeasurably, by reminding us that as a matter of first importance, even harsh parables like the 'vineyards' aim to show us who our God is, a creator and owner confident enough in sinners that he would risk sending his Son to them – *"while we were still sinners"* as Paul famously said in Romans 5:8. God did this not only to allow us to continue to occupy and enjoy, tend and nourish, but in this life provisionally and one day eternally do so in the company of His own Son. No absentee landlord is our God and no mere overnight guests are we. *'What else could God do for his vineyard'*, Isaiah asks ... he could come and lay his head down in it for a while ... send his Son to it, full of the Father's authority, acting as his final authority, to make through his suffering children out of tenants, and as Romans 8:17 says, *if we be children, then we be heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ*. This is the heir - the tenants once said - let us have our way with him. Surprise, surprise. He'll have his way with you, and his way is grace.

On their own, the parables of the vineyards leave us with two conclusions: God simply destroys the vineyard, or the occupants of it. Yet what the parable in Matthew hints towards, Paul in Philippians boldly testifies. God has another way. He will lay instead a new foundation stone for the human race. And instead of the sinners, God will destroy the power of sin, letting his Son feel it's full weight, it's utter *"sinfulness"*. And, as Paul says, be given the right to forget what lay behind and take hold of what lies ahead – a new address, another home - the one we were created for. AMEN