



October 5, 2008

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Matthew 21:33-46

“Tenant or Son”

As you know, today is World Communion Sunday, a time to celebrate our connection with other Christians in other nations all around the world in celebrating our unity in Christ.

So, I was going to invite someone from another country or culture for this worship. But I realized something important which I had forgotten -- that I am the one from another country. A few days ago, my wife and I were looking over our church photo directory at home. She said, “Honey, isn’t it interesting in my eyes, these people look like Korean. When I go to church, I keep forgetting my identity, I feel like an American.

That’s right, that kind of feeling is the true spirit of the World communion Sunday. We are different but we are one in Christ. There are no Jews, or Gentile. There is no American or Korean in Christ.

Let’s think of the Bible story we read today, the parable of the Wicked Tenants.

This parable of the tenants is clearly presented by Matthew as an allegory. The landowner represents God. The vineyard represents the Kingdom of God. The tenants are the people of Israel and specially the religious leaders. The slaves are the prophets. The son is Jesus, of course.

Matthew's interpretation relates to the story of salvation history. God entrusted his kingdom to the Israelites during the Old Testament times. God made a covenant with the people of Israel, and gave them a land flowing with milk and honey and

all he asked was that they worship him only and keep his commandments. But they were unfaithful. They worshiped other gods. They didn't keep the law.

So, God sent the prophets to correct them, Isaiah, Ezekiel, Jeremiah, Joel, Amos, Micah, and the others. They tried to persuade the people of Israel to turn back to Yahweh, but the people of Israel did not listen.

Finally, God decided to send his only son Jesus to make clear God's message. But the Jewish leaders condemned him as a heretic and put him to death. So the task of proclaiming the kingdom was given to those who accepted Jesus as the Christ, both Jew and Gentile.

So, "What is the message God is telling us through this parable?"

I think this message is quite obvious from the text. There is a warning in the parable. The landlord puts the tenants to death and leases his vineyard out to others. We are accountable for what we do with our faith.

As the church, we are the heirs of God's new covenant in Jesus Christ. We are the new Israel. We have been given the privilege of sharing the Good News of God's love with others. And Jesus specifically charged us, saying,

"Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you." (Mt. 28:19-20)

The judgment is this: If we are unable or unwilling, the call will go to someone else. The kingdom of God is not ours to enjoy all to ourselves, but ours to share graciously with everyone who's willing to accept Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior and follow in his footsteps.

Today is World Communion Sunday. It's the one Sunday of the year when we take stock of Christianity all over the world. On the other hand, it's inspiring to think of how the Christian faith is expressed in so many different languages and different cultures and in different countries.

At the same time, it's humbling to see how Christianity is growing so fast in other parts of the world. You might hear how fast their churches are growing in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. For example Korea, the territory of Korea is smaller than the state of Illinois. But the biggest church in the world is in Korea, which has five hundred thousand church members, not a denomination but one local church. There are so many mega churches in Korea. I was an associate pastor of a Korean

Methodist church which has 10 thousand members in 1995 -1998. At that time they built new church building of thirty million dollars.

After I came to the United States, I have heard some negative words and concerning voices of our denomination like sinking boat, dying church things like that. But I did not know what it meant before I got here.

Now, I have been here at Baker for three years, as a pastor. So, I have had a chance to experience this church which belong to United Methodist Church. So, are you wondering how I feel? Are we dying?

My answer is NO. This is not a dying church. I have seen so many evidences to prove we are not dead. I have met so many faithful people of God who devoted their life to helping others. I was so impressed with many people I've met here, their commitment, and sacrifice for the Kingdom of God. I'm convinced that God is here, God is working and God is using this church.

It is not important how many church members we have, how great building we have, how great tradition we have.

But it is important to know whether we have Christ or not.

Like Paul said, Philippians 3:7

Whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus My Lord.

So, the question we need to ask is not the kinds of things, like how many members we have? Are we declining or growing...

The questing we need to ask is "Do we have Christ?" Christ is the surpassing value that we need to pursue.

Let move to the next point. This is the favorite Bible passage for many preachers for a stewardship campaign. Many people are using this parable to emphasize that we have a great responsibility given from God. God is the owner. We are just tenants. This is not my vineyard. We forgot that it never belongs to us. We owe something back to God. We need to produce and give back the proper fruit. God is the owner of all things. All we have belongs to God. We are stewards.

That's right. You may have heard this kind of message so many times in this season of harvest. But I don't want to repeat those messages today. I want to focus on the big difference of the basic attitude between the son and tenant.

Who is the tenant? They don't have ownership. So, basically they don't care about the property. You know what I'm saying. When I moved here, I lived a rental home. It was an old house that was not in good condition. But the good thing was that I was not responsible for the maintenance. When I got a heavy rain, a flood like we had few weeks ago, I didn't have to worry about anything because it's not mine. I was just a tenant. My responsibility was paying the rent.

But I could not live there anymore, because we had some issue with the tenant who lived upstairs. They were not happy with our food. So, I bought a home. It was the first home I had bought in my life. What a great joy. But it was an illusion. I have had lot of headaches since I got my home, property tax, garbage, mowing, utility, water problem, many things to be fixed. Never ending anxiety!

You may understand the big difference between a Tenant and an owner? So, think about this Bible story. Who do you want be? Actually, being a tenant will be much easier. You just need to give some portion to the owner. That's all you need to do. When we hear the church speak of giving ten percent of our money as a tithe, many people bristle. Why?

You know what? If we can fulfill our responsibility to God with giving ten percent of our income, it will be the easiest way. I want to call it a spirituality of a tenant. But God wants us to be his son and daughter, not a tenant. God doesn't want us to pay religious tax. God doesn't want us to be satisfied with that kind of small duty.

God wants us to have the spirituality of the son. What is the spirituality of the Son? In this story, the owner of the vineyard sent his only son to the evil people. His son would know about his destiny. But he obeyed his father. And he was killed for his father. That is the spirit of the Son that Jesus has showed us.

So, who do you want to be, the tenant or the son?

Let me tell you something. When I came to this church three years ago, I heard an unfamiliar phrase which I had never heard before. It was "stewardship campaign". And I found that it was an annual financial event which all American churches do. Personally, I'm still wondering why we need a stewardship campaign every year.

I know the term, steward or stewardship. But I want to encourage you to go further, go deeper, not to be a tenant or steward, but a son or daughter who is not just giving something or ten percent, but giving everything to the Father.

You are not a slave and tenant...

You are more than that.

You are sons and daughters