

Twenty-Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time: Matthew 21:33-46 · The Parable of the Tenants

In March of 2018, 60 Minutes aired a report from contributor Oprah Winfrey that received a lot of attention. Winfrey traveled to Milwaukee, Wisconsin, to report on an innovative approach to childhood trauma in the city and the resulting research that indicated direct links between such trauma and greater risk for physical, mental, and social health effects. Winfrey noted that as a result of her reporting she found herself asking a "life-changing question." She told CBS This Morning, "See, we go through life and we see kids who are misbehaving. 'You juvenile delinquents,' we label them. And really the question that we should be asking is not 'what's wrong with that child' but 'what happened to that child?' And then having the resources to be able to address what happened to you. The most important question you can ask of anybody instead of what's the matter with that kid, I say what happened to that child?"

Unfortunately, we know what happens when trauma goes unaddressed. If you walk through a jail or prison today, a majority of those incarcerated will have much to say if you ask "What happened to you?" Hurt people hurt people. So much of the violence, vitriol, and division in our neighborhoods and communities is rooted directly in the soil of unresolved trauma. A more urgent question that would be asked about this gospel today, rather than asking who these tenants were, or what they did, should be: What happened to them?

Violence is never justified. If we are going to find a path toward peace, however, we must take the time to consider what leads to the desperation that leads men and women to act out. There is a direct connection between poverty (and the systemic racism that leads to it) and acts of desperation, from substance abuse to suicide to mass shootings. Again, hurt people hurt people. The question before us today therefore is this—how do we help those hurt people so that they do not continue to hurt themselves and others?

Our Church; St. Ann and many others in the Archdiocese of Chicago have gone and currently going through "**Renew my Church**" program that started more than three years ago by our Cardinal; His Eminence Archbishop Blase J. Cupich. I wanted to reflect briefly on where or how the name of this program; "Renew My church" came to be. This weekend is so fitting to reflect on what "Renew my Church is all about and what are we renewing?"

About 800 years ago, in the hillside near Assisi, a young man prayed in the midst of the ruins of an old Italian church. There, the legend goes, St. Francis heard the voice of God tell him to "**rebuild my church.**" Francis, eager to please God, **began the hard work of clearing away the rubble and started the process of literally rebuilding the Church of San Damiano and other churches nearby.**

Eventually he realized that God meant for him to also rebuild God's church in a more figurative way, providing a witness that continues to inspire Christians and other people of faith the world over. This weekend marks the feast of St. Francis, and the church that remembers him with great fondness and seeks his intercession continues to be called to provide a witness to the world. Francis chose poverty for himself and his brothers in response to the greed he found in thirteenth-century Italy. That choice allowed him to encounter the poor and suffering and to minister to them, helping them to carry their pain. May we be inspired by Francis, and by our Lord Jesus Christ who inspired him, to do the same in the world today.

We approach the parable of Tenants today to hear something new. I hope and pray that we find it speaking to us in a way that provokes us to consider how we are living and how we can act as tenants of all that we have from on high. In the parable, the son returns as a final gesture of the landowner. He is killed. That of course is the last straw. The Pharisees hear the truth about themselves, and their teeth are set on edge. The hammer, presumed to be that of God, will come down hard. But, what are we who look to Jesus Christ for our salvation to make of this judgment, especially if we do not point the finger easily at the Pharisees, but rather to ourselves who are now the guardians of the faith entrusted to us?

This is the turning point. Messengers, one after the other, come to us, bringing strange unsettling news about our stewardship; they speak in the name of God, and we resist them, sometimes forcibly, as occurs when the new light of revelation confronts received religion. We can and do beat the messenger.

There are times when all of us act as if the world is our fiefdom and we are supreme over all we survey. We forget that everything we have is on loan to us from God. We are temporary tenants. We don't own anything, even though we sometimes act as if we own it all. Everything ultimately belongs to God.

We act like owners when we are only tenants. This brings us to the second thing we need to say. Happiness comes to those who understand they own nothing. These tenants in our lesson were greedy. They wanted everything for themselves and were unwilling to give the landowner his fair share. The landowner, on the other hand, was generous. He had given them control of his vast estate. They could have all of its abundance. All he asked was a share of the produce. Sounds like you and me, doesn't it? Sounds like every person who has ever walked this earth. God has provided for us so abundantly. All He asks is a small portion in return. But we are greedy. We want to withhold what is rightfully His. How sad. The happiest people who have ever lived are those who gratefully acknowledge the ownership of God.

Could it be that we, too, confuse our mission with comfort and ease? Would Christ receive the same reception here that he received there? This is not our world, it's God's. This is not our church, it's God's. We are only tenants. Stewards. We have a responsibility to return to Him a portion of what is His already, and to use that which we have received to His glory

The parable suggests that the landowner is relentless in sending messengers against all odds and with great patience. The battered and beaten return with the bad news, and he keeps sending more messengers to those entrusted to care for the vineyard. It's as if he does not want to believe the tenants could be so tenacious in their resistance. We look at Christian history and notice the same thing has occurred from generation to generation.

Yet there may come a time when the Son — the living word of God — comes to us, confronts us, and calls us to a new understanding. That moment — and how we respond to it — will be the moment when this parable is fulfilled. If we have ears to hear, our rage and our conviction will be the moment the gospel comes alive for us.

Amen.