

October 8, 2017: Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Year A)
Matthew 21:33-46: Own to Rent

Most of you know that Dawn and I recently completed a building project. I'm referring to our home. When I say "recently" it is a little misleading, because we moved in almost a year ago. When I say "completed" I'm not being entirely truthful, because we still have a lot of work to do. But we do live there. And we feel very fortunate. We are planning to invite all of you over for some kind of open house type thing, but we're not quite there yet. But you don't have to wait for that. You can stop by anytime, Mondays and Thursdays, between the hours of 5:30 and 6:00.

What you may not know is that this was our second building project. When we were living in Elizabeth City, we were having a difficult time finding a home we liked that was within our budget. So we decided to purchase a foreclosure that we could then renovate. HGTV makes it look so easy. But if you have ever done anything like that, you know it isn't.

It was an older house to start with, but on top of that it was in terrible condition. The previous owners had basically let it go to ruin. There were rumors circulating in the neighborhood that they had used the house as a home base for all kinds of illegal activity. In the process of renovating it we found evidence that proved at least some of the rumors were true. For an example of how bad it was, I fell through the floor and into the crawl space three times because the sub floor was completely rotten. To make a long story short, after about six months of blood, sweat and tears, we moved in. Everything was great. 1 year later, we ended up moving.

We decided to sell. We put it on the market. A few people looked at it, but nobody made us an offer we couldn't refuse. So we had no choice but to rent it. We went from being homeowners to landlords. That was really hard for me. I'm not really cut out to be a landlord. But the worst part was to watch how poorly our tenants treated this house that I had made so much of an investment in. I'm not talking strictly in financial terms. I'm talking about the human cost. By human I'm referring to myself.

In the demolition process I inhaled asbestos. I came in contact with lead-based paint. I straddled a floor joist, while standing in someone else's waste, because the sewage pipes had separated, to replace a bathroom floor. And then there was the work of putting it all back together. Replacing windows, installing flooring, trimming it out, painting, replacing the roof. This house had all the potential in the world to become the perfect home. Now these tenants were destroying it.

I'm being a little dramatic. When our agreement with our tenants ended, and we returned to prepare to put it back on the market, it wasn't that bad. People who are in the landlord business have told me enough horror stories to convince me how much worse it could have been. But I had invested so much in this house. So even the little things, the rent money that was sometimes late, the holes in the wall, the stains on the carpet, the broken doorknob, the missing covers on the smoke detectors, all said to me, "They didn't care about this house as much as I did." I was so glad when we finally sold the house, because being a landlord for something I cared so much about was just a little too much for me.

The parable Jesus told was about a landlord in a similar situation, only he was willing to go so much further than I was to protect his investment.

The landlord in Jesus' story didn't own a home but a large piece of property that he decided to turn into a vineyard. He spared no expense to insure its success. He put a fence around it, to keep out animals that would have trampled it or otherwise destroyed it. He dug a wine press in close proximity to the vines, so a long and difficult transport could be avoided. He built a watchtower in the center, so someone could stand guard over it all, making sure birds were not eating the grapes as they ripened, and thieves were not stealing them. But needed people to tend to the vines, to harvest the grapes, and to operate the winepress, so he leased it out to tenants and entrusted them with those responsibilities.

But they were bad tenants. They didn't pay their rent, which typically would have been a portion of the the harvest, but in this case seems to be all of it. When the harvest time had come, the landlord sent his servants to collect what was owed to him, but instead of paying up, the tenants beat, killed, and stoned his servants. I got upset over a broken doorknob. They said it just broke from normal use, but that is not possible. There is no way I could have tolerated this much, but this landlord could, and then some. He sent another group of servants, and the tenants treated them the very same way.

But that still was not enough for him to find somebody new. He sent his Son, somehow believing he would be able to convince them to give the landowner his due. What the landowner must have considered an act of mercy, they saw as opportunity. They killed the son, thinking if he was dead, the vineyard would finally become theirs for good. It sounds like twisted logic, but it was not unheard of in those days that if a landlord was absent for long enough, the ownership of the property would transfer to those who had tended it.

Their actions reveal their problem. These tenants thought they were owners. They forgot they were renters. They acted as if the landlord had built this vineyard for them and for their enjoyment. But that wasn't the case. He built this vineyard so he could reap a reward. The vineyard was for his benefit. He was going to great lengths to receive the fruits of his labor, a return on his investment, but they continued to withhold it from him.

Jesus was telling this parable to the chief priests and the elders. And at this point in the story he paused and asked them what they thought the landlord should do to these awful tenants. Immediately they handed down a sentence of a miserable death, even referring to the tenants as wretches. As Jesus switched topics, and began to talk about the stone that the builders rejected, becoming the cornerstone upon which God would build his kingdom, they realized he was talking about them, and they had just pronounced judgment upon themselves. In effect, this was their eviction notice.

In our world, no landlord would go this far to ensure his tenants were protecting his investment. No landlord would be this patient. No landlord would risk sending his son to collect payment, especially after others had been beaten and killed and stoned. But this isn't about us, it's about God, and the lengths he is willing to go to, to ensure his people bring him the glory, and the honor, and the praise is due him.

It's easy to see the vineyard represents God's people, a people he created, a people he called into being, a people he chose, out of all the peoples in the earth, to be his prized possession, to faithfully represent God in a world that had rejected him. The servants of course represented the prophets that God sent to his people, to get them back on track, to remind them of their holy calling. Like the tenants, God's people rejected them, persecuting, torturing, and even killing some of them. The identity of the Son is

the most obvious of all. Jesus was predicting his death. He knew what the chief priests and elders were planning to do with him as soon as they could convince the crowds to join them.

This would be the final straw. God was finally going to replace these tenants with people from all nations that would bear the fruit of the kingdom. This group of people is the Church, the community of people who follow Jesus. The fruit he expects to receive are the transformed lives, people who would exhibit love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness and self-control. People who live as citizens of the kingdom. People who look like Jesus. Through the Church, God would finally receive the glory, and honor, and praise that is due him.

So now, as part of the Church, as followers of Jesus, God is asking, “What kind of tenant are you?” “What are you doing with God’s investment in your life?” He has literally poured blood, sweat and tears into your life. Through your life, does God receive glory, and honor, and praise. Are these lives really our own? No, the lives we have are not our own, they have been entrusted to us. We should never forget; we are not an owner. We are a renter. Our lives have been purchased for a great price, the precious blood of Christ, so we should honor Him with our life.

Many of you are familiar with the Moravian Church, or at least their cookies. In some ways we share some of the same heritage, as they originated in Germany, predating the Protestant Reformation. There is a story told of two young Moravian men, really boys, who felt compelled to become missionaries. Specifically, they felt called to an island inhabited by African slaves, that were completely isolated, with no real possibility that they would ever hear the Gospel.

These two young men tried many times to get permission from the owner to visit the island to preach the Gospel, but each time he refused. Finally, they decided the only way they could accomplish the mission God had given them was to sell themselves into slavery. They did this, and as they were preparing to board the ship that would take them to this island, their family and friends gathered to see them off, knowing they would probably never see them again.

Naturally, many people asked them why they were doing this thing. Each time their answer was the same, “May the Lamb that was slain receive the reward of his suffering.” He suffered for a purpose, so that you and I... This would become the slogan of Moravian missions, and it remains so to this day. So I want to leave you with this question, “Is the Lamb that was slain receiving the reward of his suffering in your life?” Is your life bearing the fruit for the kingdom?”