

**Tenant Trouble, by Daniel H. Kuhn, Jr. 21081005**  
**Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20 and Matthew 21:33-43**  
**Elon Community Church, United Church of Christ, 5 October, 2008**

We hear how those nasty tenants treated the owner of the vineyard and we're incensed! How could they behave that way? Did they think they could take possession of the vineyard by killing the slaves and the son of the owner? We long for a sense of justice. Just wait until the owner comes back! You don't treat the owner of property that way and get away with it.

We know Jesus was talking about something more than a vineyard, tenants, and owners. He was talking about religious leaders who had disregarded God's messengers. They had disregarded and stoned prophets who warned the people to live by God's standards. Finally, the religious leaders killed the son himself.

This was a parable probably originally told by Jesus. More importantly, it was picked up by Matthew after the crucifixion to interpret Jesus' death to early Christians. Matthew wrote to encourage those who followed a crucified Christ.

We note with glee that the owner will return to take possession of the vineyard and punish those wicked tenants. But, wait a minute! Don't gloat! Jesus' words are an indictment of us also. We can't talk about the Jews who lost the vineyard, but the Christians who must be faithful to keep it. The tenants wanted to claim the vineyard as their own, and that was the source of their sin.

The tenants did not own the field. They were there only to take care of it. The scribes, pharisees, and priests claimed the law and faith as their own. They wanted no one disturbing their faith. Do you see the similarity? The vineyard is the church which we as individuals sometimes want to claim as our own. We refer to this building as "My church."

The church is God's and we are only the tenants. We don't own the church: it is God's church. We are only here to take care of it. In the parable, only the tenants who bear the fruit will be allowed to continue tending it. The vineyard can be given to new tenants any time the owner chooses.

Matthew's understanding of the fruit is: righteous living, human caring and courageous witnessing.

Righteous living: as Spike Lee would say, "Doing the right thing."<sup>1</sup> We know right from wrong, do it.

Human caring: caring enough to pray for and act for those who are in need. It means rolling up one's sleeves, working as a hospital volunteer, serving food at the Allied Churches' Shelter, nailing a wall for Habitat for Humanity, or visiting a person shut in at home or in a residential facility.

Courageous witnessing: standing up for what is right, justice, and God's law. Sharing this community of faith with those going through a difficult time in their lives, such as a separation, divorce, or a serious illness.

It is wonderful to be a tenant in this vineyard. The owner did all the work. All the tenants had to do was tend the vines. The landowner had invested time and energy. The owner planted the vines, put a fence around the vineyard, dug the wine press, and built a watch tower. The hard work was done; all the tenants had to do was pick grapes and squeeze juice out of them.

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<sup>1</sup>*Do the Right Thing*, a movie written, produced, and directed by Spike Lee in 1989

The church is like a vineyard: those before us have done all the work. They have given us the church, the kingdom of God on earth. Christ is the foundation. Disciples, martyrs, reformers— all the Christians of the past— with God's direction, have dug, scraped, and built what we have. All we have to do is tend to the vineyard and bear the fruits of it. As tenants, we need to prune, water, fertilize, and share the fruit.

The landlord behaved naïvely, which isn't saying that the landlord is naïve. God gives humanity freedom to act as we wish. We can tear up the kingdom. We can try to keep all the fruit for ourselves. We can even disregard or kill those who remind us to be faithful to God's will. Witness the fate of Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Bishop Oscar Romero.

In the end, there will be a reckoning for how faithfully we have acted. We also have the freedom to act in kindness, righteousness, and faithfulness. When we do, we can feel good, proud, and peaceful!

The world is God's vineyard and we are only tenants here. Future generations will judge us for the condition of the vineyard we turn over to them to take care of.

On this World Communion Sunday, we come to this table to meet God. After hearing Jesus' parable this morning, that could be scary. We know that we are called into account. But, we discover that the God we meet at the table is compassionate and forgiving. We discover we can be given a new chance to bear fruit. We have value. That is cause for thanksgiving.

On this World Communion Sunday, there are two additional things to be grateful for. Grapes: they have been squeezed in the winepress of time and sacrifice. Grapes, transformed by Christ, yield us a refreshing and nourishing fountain of spiritual strength. No matter how unfaithful we have been, we are still invited to the table. We are given a chance to be refreshed, to start over, and try that service again.

Secondly, we come to this table not as individuals, but as community— a community of saints in this room, saints around the earth, saints in the past and saints in the future.

What a beautiful and wonderful crowd to be with. We strengthen each other. We are strengthened by spirit of people like Martin Sholtzberger and Evelyn Terrell, perhaps our parents, or a former minister.

How wonderful it is to be able to come to this table.