

Matthew 21:33-46

If you'll remember from last week's sermon Jesus has just ridden triumphantly into Jerusalem. It's his second day in town and his authority has been questioned by the Chief priests and elders. In last week's gospel reading he told them a parable of two sons whom he compared to them and the tax collectors and prostitutes, saying the marginalized people would be in the kingdom of God before them. Like us, before it was explained, they had no idea why they were hearing a story about the two disobedient sons. It wasn't until they heard today's parable that they understood Jesus was speaking of them. Again, their fear of how the people would react kept them from following through on their thoughts, until the time was right.

If you are at all familiar with today's reading you will remember that the landowner in the parable represents God, his vineyard is Israel. The "farmers" symbolize the Jewish religious leaders who have been entrusted with caring for the people of Israel. Prophets, symbolized by servants collecting the rent, have been sent to bring Israel back into a right relationship with God, but they have all been mistreated and rejected. The one's whose demise we know about are, according to tradition (and Hebrews 11:37), Jeremiah who was stoned to death by Israel's leaders in Egypt, Isaiah who was sawn in half by King Manasseh, and Ezekiel who was executed by an idolatrous Israelite leader of the Jewish community in the Babylonian exile. After the servants, the landowner sends his own son, who of course represents Jesus, and the leaders kill him as well.

The parable goes on to explain that the landowner will return and avenge his son's murder, as Jesus quotes Psalm 118:22-23, asking the people if they have never heard that 'The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord's doing, and it is amazing in our eyes'. The builders are the leaders of Israel who reject Jesus. But God will bring glory upon Jesus. Jesus then tells the religious authorities that they will lose control of the kingdom of God, it will be given to a new community that includes Jews and Gentiles, and this new community will produce fruit. Jesus is letting the religious men know that he has more authority than they give him credit for; even more authority than they themselves have, and that his authority will be never-ending.

Rev. King Duncan believes this parable is about greed. He tells the story: He was, by all accounts, a successful man. This builder of fine homes in an upscale American suburb was known to all as a creative craftsman, a shrewd businessman, a fair-minded employer, and a generous benefactor. But he was aging now, and before he set out for Florida for the winter, he approached his top superintendent and told him that he was retiring. "I want you to build me a home, the finest home this company has ever built. Spare no expense, use the finest materials, employ the most gifted tradesmen, and build me a masterpiece before I come home next spring."

The next day, the superintendent set out to build that home, but not exactly to orders. If his boss was retiring, that meant he would be losing his job, so he needed to pad his own savings account, lest he be destitute. He ordered inferior concrete blocks for the foundation, but charged the builder for premium blocks, and he pocketed the difference. He hired inexperienced carpenters, plumbers, electricians, roofers, and landscapers, but he charged his boss wages that would be paid to master craftsmen, and he put the difference in his own bank account. He installed cheap appliances and lighting, insufficient insulation, inferior carpet, and drafty windows, and he skimmed a tidy sum off the top for himself. In the spring, when the

home was finished, it looked spectacular; it was the signature home in the neighborhood, and the only thing that made the superintendent happier than how the project looked was the bottom line in his personal bank account, which had grown by hundreds of thousands of dollars that winter.

When the elderly business owner arrived home from Florida that spring, he toured this home fit for a king, and he was ecstatic. The superintendent handed him the keys and thanked his boss for the privilege of working for him all these years. And then the owner did an unthinkable thing: he said to the superintendent, "You have been a trusted friend and a loyal partner in my business for all of these years; you deserve a home like this." And he handed him the keys.

The retiring home builder was a generous man, the likes of which are rarely found today. The superintendent thought he was being crafty, but in his greed he had only cheated himself.

We are surrounded by greed in today's world. Some people think that they are the only important person and they will steal and cheat to get ahead of the pack. According to a report published Sept. 27, 2023 by statista.com (<https://www.statista.com/statistics/203961/wealth-distribution-for-the-us/>) as of the first quarter of 2023, 69% of the wealth in the United States is held by 10% of the wage earners. That means over half of the wealth is held by 10%, not of the population, but 10% of those earning a wage.

The remaining 90% share unequally the 31% balance of wealth. Those are the casualties of greed. And these are just the highlights. Examples of human selfishness and greed surround us everyday. And that's why this parable that Jesus tells us in Matthew's gospel is so timely and so relevant; because as that wise homebuilder knew the heart of his superintendent, so Jesus knows the selfish condition of our hearts, and he desires that we change our ways.

The last line says it all: "When the Pharisees realized that Jesus was speaking of them, they wanted to arrest him and made plans to kill him. 'He was speaking of us' they said." Of course he was! Those who are very greedy don't think they are being greedy, they believe they are entitled to their wealth because they have earned it, sometimes pointing at others, blaming them for their selfish, unethical, and hurtful behavior. And, although we don't like to hear it, Jesus was speaking of us too. German theologian Helmut Thielicke said that we will never understand the parables until we see ourselves starring in them. Unfortunately, we are the renters. We are the workers of the vineyard. We have been given everything we need for life. For some of us it is enough, but for others it is not. Greed takes over and the desire for more, more, more rules.

God, the source of everything we have, asks for our rent... that is our time, our abilities, a small portion of our money, (even though it all belongs to God), and God asks us to live a righteous life. God is compassionate and gracious, but there will be a day when Jesus returns when it will become obvious if our rent is in arrears. So I invite you to search your heart, as I will search mine, to find the greed that you carry, to find the ways you are not being faithful to God who is faithful, and to pray for the strength to change.

We have been given a life in the wealthiest nation in the world, our vineyard, a gift from God who loves us and whom we can love with our whole being. May we live a life of thankful praise and generosity.

All glory be to God.