

Matthew 21:33-46 33 "Listen to another parable. There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a wine press in it, and built a watchtower. Then he leased it to tenants and went to another country. 34 When the harvest time had come, he sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his produce. 35 But the tenants seized his slaves and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. 36 Again he sent other slaves, more than the first; and they treated them in the same way. 37 Finally he sent his son to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.' 38 But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, 'This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance.' 39 So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him. 40 Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?" 41 They said to him, "He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the harvest time." 42 Jesus said to them, "Have you never read in the scriptures: 'The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord's doing, and it is amazing in our eyes'?" 43 Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom. 44 The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls." 45 When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they realized that he was speaking about them. 46 They wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowds, because they regarded him as a prophet. [NRSV]

Would You Rent to Them?

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord, Jesus Christ.

What do you think about those tenant-farmers? -- beatings and murders? -- terrible!
They signed a contract with the landowner, but they broke it.

Would you rent to them? Who were they anyway?

The last two verses of our gospel today tell us -- the chief priests and Pharisees realized that Jesus was speaking about them.

Notice that this is another 'Parable of the Kingdom' -- a story about God's great plan for His Church.

The larger picture goes all the way back to God's covenant with His ancient people, Israel. In this story they would be those tenant farmers who cared for the vineyard.

So my first question is, "These tenants, would you rent to them?"

But behind that question is a much bigger one: **Would God rent to us?**

What kind of tenants are we -- the kind who break contracts or who keep them?

The issue today has to do with agreements, contracts, promises, and covenants.

Part 1 is about The Wicked Tenants.

First, we notice that the wicked tenants were contract-breakers.

Instead of turning over the landowner's part of the crop, they kept all the fruit from the vineyard, and they beat, stoned and killed the servants of the landowner.

You and I make contracts all the time, many contracts -- e.g., those little credit card slips.

Or we hire a contractor to work on the deck or paint the house.

Of course, first we must buy the house and sign a mortgage and all those papers.

In order to get married we sign a marriage license, and then we say out loud, "I do, I will."

Or we join a Christian congregation and we stand before this Altar and make promises right out loud to God Almighty. Important contracts! Written and spoken: giving our word.

Then there are the other spoken contracts: "I'll read you a story at bedtime;" or, "I'll wash the car tomorrow;" or "I'll play 'catch' with you a little later."

Have we ever broken any of those contracts? The written ones or the spoken ones?

Which of these contracts are really the most important anyway?

The wicked tenants handed out beatings -- our sins against God and against each other can be verbal and spiritual beatings.

Let's face it -- we are contract-breakers.

Secondly, why do we have to have contracts anyway? Isn't there some other way?

The answer is "no" because at the level of our hearts, where we should be faithful and true, we find greed, and fear, and scheming, and faithlessness.

Just like those terrible renters.

Look at our country right now.

People are afraid because of the economy, and our leaders don't seem to know how to lead. We see greed and scheming and broken promises and lies, and we find ourselves in fear.

Have you ever read "Sherman's Lagoon" in the Sunday comics?

Here's one: Shark & Turtle are sitting at the bottom of the lagoon when Crab comes along, and he says, "Vote for me for Mayor of the Lagoon. Here's my brochure."

Next frame: Shark, "Why should I vote for you?" Crab, "Because my opponent is a slimeball."

Next frame: Crab again, "Have you seen this video on youtube?"

Shark & Turtle, "No."

Next: Crab, "This is my opponent doing the Hokey Pokey at a wedding reception in 1992."

Next frame: Crab, "As your Mayor, I promise I will never do the Hokey Pokey."

Next frame: Crab, "It's all in the brochure." And he hurries off.

Next frame: Silence. Shark & Turtle are looking at the brochures.

Last frame: Shark, "Once he gets elected, he'll hokey pokey." Turtle, "They all do."

Isn't it the truth? Our leaders all "hokey-pokey!" And we do, too!

And they do, and we do, because, as it reads in Genesis right after the great flood, 21 **"Then the LORD said in His heart, 'I will never again curse the ground for man's sake, [for]the imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth;...'"** [Gen. 10, NASB]

Yes, our hearts are evil from birth on. It's known theologically as "Original sin."

So what should be done to those wicked tenants? Our Lord asked this question of the Temple leaders as he ended his parable.

They knew the answer: 41 **They said to him, "He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the harvest time."**

The Elders and Chief Priests were condemned out of their own mouths.

The great OT prophet Isaiah saw it coming. Our first reading today concludes,

**7 For the vineyard of the LORD Almighty is the house of Israel
And the men of Judah are the garden of his delight.**

And he looked for justice, but saw bloodshed;

For righteousness, but heard cries of distress. [Is. 5 NRSV]

We, too, want justice and righteousness, but they are in short supply in our day.

Now I'm beginning to get depressed hearing myself say all this bad news.

But our Lord wasn't afraid to tell it like it is. After all, it is Tuesday of Holy Week as He tells this story -- in three days he would be dead upon that Roman cross.

Take it from a hospice chaplain -- in twelve years I've sat at the bedside of more than 200 dying people -- on their death beds they speak truth.

Our Lord Jesus, in the last few days of his life, tells it like it is.

Thus when he spells out the Good News, it is good news indeed. Here it is, 42 **Jesus said to them, "Have you never read in the scriptures: 'The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord's doing, and it is amazing in our eyes'?"** [NRSV]

That leads to

Part 2, Jesus Keeps His Contract

First of all, that Stone which the builders rejected, well, that Stone is Messiah Jesus.

The builders -- the political leaders made up of the priests and elders -- refused their Messiah when He came.

They didn't care for His kind of Kingdom when He announced it, a Kingdom of love and peace and forgiveness.

And so they took Jesus outside the city onto that dome of rock, Golgotha, the very place where stones had been quarried for the Temple, where the only stone left was what had been rejected by the builders -- not good enough -- and there they crucified Him.

Wonder of wonders, **amazing** indeed! That rejected Messiah, that "rejected Stone," put to death on top of rejected stones, has become the capstone, the head of the corner.

We read, v.42b **"...this was the LORD's doing, and it is amazing in our eyes."**

Our Lord here was quoting Psalm 118 where the Psalmist is using the name of the God of the Covenant, the name that was so holy that not even the rabbis would pronounce it.

The psalmist was speaking prophecy.

So we see that this Calvary, this Golgotha, event was already in the mind of God when He chose Abraham to be the Father of a multitude and established His covenant with him.

Now here in the Gospel of Matthew, we see how the ancient God of Israel kept His covenant, His contract, with his wandering people.

He sent His One and Only Son to be the Savior of all humankind.

This One and Only Son, this Messiah, Christ Jesus, for His part kept HIS contract -- he had said to his disciples just days before this last Monday of His life, "**Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and to the scribes; and they will condemn Him to death,...**" [Mt. 20:18, NRSV]

Our Lord Jesus knew what was in store for Him in Jerusalem, and still He went -- He kept His contract.

That means that all of us who trust in Him, as Peter puts it, — **5 you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.** [1 Peter 2--TNIV]

So **the second great fact** about our Lord keeping his contract is that this building project is going on right now as we worship here this holy day.

By Word and Sacrament we are always becoming a spiritual house of living stones.

We are more and more a holy priesthood, bringing our offerings of praise and thanksgiving, the offerings of our hearts and hands.

A number of years ago, three Christian leaders founded the Alliance Defense Fund for the purpose of defending what they call, "our first liberty," namely, our freedom of religion.

These three were, Dr. Wm. Bright, Dr. James Dobson, and Dr. D. James Kennedy.

The ADF defends Christians whose religious freedom has been taken away.

For example, a few years ago, an eight year old in Louisiana brought a book of Bible stories to school to read during quiet time. The class was told they could bring any book of their choice, but when Harrison pulled out his Bible stories, he was told never to bring it back because, [quote] 'it is too thick to fit in the desk.' So he brought his New Testament. Now the teacher's agenda came out -- she gave him a harsh tongue-lashing and demanded that he keep the Bible and all Christian reading material at home. The boy was reduced to tears. An ADF attorney sent a letter to the school district, which immediately corrected the teacher, and Harrison could bring his NT to school again.

Good! A victory for religious liberty! Justice prevailed!

What was it that the LORD Almighty wanted from Israel & Judah? "**Justice, but He saw bloodshed; righteousness, but He heard cries of distress.**" [Is. 5:7, NASB]

The Church is the New Israel of God -- must not we who are the Church in this place promote justice and righteousness?

These are just two of the fruits from the Vineyard -- what more can we do?

Conclusion: So, would God rent to us? The Heavenly Landowner of us all does rent out His beautiful vineyard to us, and he comes to us, his Church, now for fruit.

He keeps forgiving our breaking of our contracts -- what can He expect in return?

What shall be our answer?

St. Paul answers for us in our second lesson today, "**Forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize...**"

And that prize is nothing less than "**...the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.**" [Ph.3]

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

S.D.g. -- The Rev. Dr. Donald Schedler, Ph.D., Chaplain, Snowline Hospice, Diamond Springs, CA.

(Rockwell 10; Georgia 10)