

Sunday, April 7, 2019 – Fifth Sunday in Lent
“Whose Is It?”

Luke 20: 9-20

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Story Applied Structure

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, Amen.

Freedom! I wasn't answerable to anyone. I lived 650 miles from home. I had my own car. If I wanted to (and often did), I could hang out with friends until 3am. No one nagged me about if I finished my homework (somehow I got it done). Yes, college was pure freedom, and I, well I was a man.

Worlds collided during my first extended period back at home. It was Christmas break, and some other college friends were driving through on their way to their homes, and stayed in my hometown for a couple of days. You'd think after four months of hardly seeing my family I'd want to spend time with them – instead I was off with Mike, Greg, Matt and Kristy – all day long and late into the night. My first two days at home and I'm a ghost to my family. The first sign of trouble was the 3am phone call to Mike's house (this was, after all before texting or cell phones) and my Mom wanted to know where her 18 year old son, so recently sprung loose from the nest was. After all, her son was living under her roof, driving a car titled in her name and he had not even done so much as the courtesy of telling her where he was since he walked out the door 16 hours earlier. You'd think he would realize who was footing the bills for this not-so self-sufficient life of freedom, you'd think he would value some time with his family, but he was more interested in pointing out that she had no idea what he was doing or where he was while he was away at school, so how was this any different? It's ok, cringe if you want. Let's just say they had a painful adjustment period that Christmas.

The stakes are quite a bit higher in Jesus' parable – a man plants a vineyard, the renters agreeing to pay their rent by giving back a portion of the produce. So, the landlord, who owned and planted the vineyard sends his servants to collect – three different times, only to have them thrown out, beaten up, whatever. The owner of course is God and the vineyard is Israel. The people of Israel owe their praise and thanksgiving to the owner and instead they hoard for themselves, messenger after messenger are sent – Moses and Joshua, the judges, Samuel, Nathan, Elijah, Elisha, Isaiah, Jeremiah – each treated worse than the last. Finally God decides

to send His Son who He loves – they must respect Him – but the worst treatment of all is reserved for the Son.

The mistake of the renters is much the same as mine. Losing perspective over whose it is. Just as my car and my freedom were a gift, not earned, even as I treated it like I was the adult, so too these renters, treating what does not belong to them as their own personal possession, as they trash the owner of the vineyard as His people, even His Son. It's no wonder this parable is sometimes called the Parable of the Wicked Tenants.

If you haven't noticed, this text is pretty severe. The owner of the vineyard kills the tenants and gives the vineyard to others. Everyone who falls on the stone the builders rejected will be broken to pieces and crushed... and if I wanted, I could give a great fire and brimstone message to all those unbelievers out there to repent and believe in Jesus...

But I'd rather talk today about something all of us can relate to, which is to take this as a caution for what God has to say to us gathered in this room today.

The most obvious group this applies to today is pastors – after all, Jesus shares this parable in response to the religious leaders. The church – whose is it? Where does it get its direction, who makes the decisions? Yes, I know God works through people but when you break it down you realize that we're occupying a small parcel of God's vineyard here. It's not mine, or the Board of Directors, or the Voter Assembly's, or the District's or Synod's – it's God's. If you weren't aware, I have some news for you – God uses imperfect humans to do this pastoral work and if we aren't careful, if we don't stay close to God's Word and let God humble us, we're prone to think of this as "ours." At my previous church some great people, totally well meaning would ask if I'm interested in having "my own church" some day. Now I know what they meant, but think of the way the question is phrased! No, I serve at the pleasure of my boss, the vineyard owner. Same goes with trying to make plans in ministry – plans are important, right? That's why before we do anything else we're prayerfully seeking direction. Please come to the event on April 24th, fill out the survey by next Sunday and participate as we pool together our thoughts, stand on God's Word and pray for God's vision for this congregation to go forward in 2020 and beyond.

Which brings us to all of us, the people of God, because our very lives are part of God's vineyard, and we the individual vines meant to bear good fruit to God's glory. When the Lord comes to take an account of our lives, whether by our conscience speaking up, God's Word hitting us between the eyes, a daring person being willing to confront us – do we listen? Are our lives an open book for the owner's Son to audit? Or do we fancy this life our own, the intrusions none of anyone's business, the vineyard ours? Do we want to ignore the intrusions, throw Him out, proud and defiant to the end?

Your life, my life – they are not our own. Every ability we have, every bit of credit we've earned, every resource we use and every possession we acquire is courtesy of the house. We're playing with house money. It's all gifts from God, to be used for a time and when our time is up, it all goes back to the house.

The dog I had growing up is my favorite animal, but she wasn't the brightest. If I approached Goldie when she was in trouble and she didn't want me to see her, her solution would be to turn her head away – "I can't see you, so you can't see me." Didn't Adam and Eve do that too? Off to the woods they go, hands trying to cover themselves from God and each other ashamed of their nakedness – just as foolish as my dog. God sees you two. He sees us too – whether we open our lives to Jesus' prying eyes or not, He reads us like an open book. There are no secrets.

None of this is as scary as it sounds. Yes, His audit of the fruit we bear will show things lacking, bad fruit like selfishness and pride mixed in with the good things we do. The Son knows, and so does the Owner of the vineyard. He sends His Son anyway. That Son sees our shortcomings and He writes them off. You've heard there's no such thing as a free lunch – that's true. If it's free to you, someone else paid for it. His name is Jesus and the free lunch is that despite every failure in which you don't measure up to the productivity and high standard of perfection that God expects, Jesus takes your debt on Himself and suffers our punishment on the cross. The God who gave us our bodies, our families, the world in which we live, the world we contribute to messing up, goes above and beyond and even risks His own beloved Son for you and me.

Whose is it? It's God's – and thank God. When He grabs hold of our lives, the riches and blessings are greater than any profit we could earn by ourselves. Forgiveness, eternal life, adoption into the most royal of royal families – it doesn't get any better than that. In Jesus' name, Amen.