

Ordinary 27A - 2023

"You're sitting in my chair."

A story was making the rounds during the American presidential campaign a few years ago. An asteroid hits the speaker's platform at a Seattle conference center, and Al Gore, George W. Bush and Bill Gates, founder of Microsoft and one of the richest men on earth, all arrive in Heaven at the same time. They are greeted by the Almighty, Who is sitting on His golden throne. First, the Lord speaks to Gore, asking what he believes in. "I believe in the Internet and a clean environment," Gore replies. "Very good," the Almighty says. "Come sit near me." Then he asks George W. Bush the same question. "I believe in cutting taxes and taking good care of the military," Bush replies. "Excellent," says the Almighty. "Come sit near me." Then God asks Bill Gates what he believes. "I believe," Gates replies, "you're sitting in my chair." — There are times when all of us try to put ourselves in God's seat. There are times when all of us act as if the world is our fiefdom and we are supreme over all we survey. We forget that everything we have is on loan to us from God. We are temporary tenants. We don't own anything, even though we sometimes act as if we own it all. Everything ultimately belongs to God.

(<https://frtonyshomilies.com/>).

I know that "The Parable of the Wicked Tenants," (as this story is popularly called), isn't straightforwardly about climate change or the environment. Jesus tells this particular story to indict the religious leaders of his day for exploiting and mistreating God's people — the people of Israel, God's "vineyard." The parable is meant to expose the corruption of the religious elite, and condemn their obsessions with privilege and power. Through the pointed story of the vineyard, Jesus implies that the chief priests and elders are like the wicked tenants. They abuse their authority, dishonor God's house, and mistreat both God's messengers (the Prophets) and God's son (Jesus).

At the heart of this parable, though, is a distinction that I think speaks very pointedly to our current environmental crisis. What the tenants in the story neglect to understand — or very deliberately choose to ignore — is that they are **stewards** rather than **owners** of the vineyard. When the landowner asks for his rightful share of the harvest, the tenants take offense. As if the vineyard belongs to them, and it is the landowner who is in the wrong for making a claim on the land at all. Somewhere along the way, the tenants have forgotten their place. Their vocation. Their standing in relationship to both the land and the landowner. To put it bluntly, they have forgotten that they own nothing — *nothing at all*. Everything belongs to the landowner. **Theirs is not a vocation of ownership; it is a vocation of caring, tending, safeguarding, cultivating, and protecting — on behalf of another.**

It's worth noting here that Jesus does not describe the evildoers in the story as thieves or marauders. They are not outsiders — they are the landowner's trusted tenants. He *chose* them, and granted them creative license to steward the vineyard for the benefit of all. How much more tragic, then, when they abuse the landowner's trust so cruelly.

The analogy I'm drawing is of course obvious. Have we not, like the tenants in the parable, deluded ourselves into thinking that we "own" the earth and all that is in it, when in fact, we are meant to be stewards only? Have we not, like the tenants, assumed that God is absent, or apathetic, or

uninvolved — and hoarded the beauty and bounty of creation for our own selfish ease, gain, comfort, and convenience? Have we not, like the tenants, ignored and even maligned the countless messengers who have warned us over the past many years that our rapacious relationship with the planet will lead us to destruction?

The truth is, we humans *crave* ownership. We like possessing things. We like controlling things. We like believing that things exist primarily to please, feed, entertain, soothe, empower, and protect us. We are "rent-to-own" folks by both temperament and preference, and the idea that we don't in fact own anything deeply offends us. *Stewardship* deeply offends us. It insults our core sense of entitlement, and threatens our core identity as consumers.

When it comes to the planet, the bottom line is crystal clear in Scripture: we are NOT owners. We are caretakers of a vineyard God cares about deeply, a vineyard that will not thrive or even survive if we continue to treat it as a cheap, inexhaustible commodity.

"Irish Blessing.

His name was Fleming, and he was a poor Scottish farmer. One day, while trying to make a living for his family, he heard a cry for help coming from a nearby bog. He dropped his tools and ran to the bog. There mired to his waist in black muck, was a terrified boy, screaming and struggling to free himself. Farmer Fleming saved the lad from what could have been a slow and terrifying death. The next day, a fancy carriage pulled up to the Scotsman's sparse surroundings. An elegantly dressed nobleman stepped out and introduced himself as the father of the boy Farmer Fleming had saved. "I want to repay you", said the nobleman. "You saved my son's life. "No, I can't accept payment for what I did", the Scottish farmer replied, waving off the offer.

At that moment, the farmer's own son came to the door of the family hovel. "Is that your son?" the nobleman asked. "Yes", the farmer replied proudly. "I'll make you a deal. Let me provide him with the level of education my own son will enjoy. If the lad is anything like the father, he'll no doubt grow to be a man we both will be proud of." And that he did. Farmer Fleming's son attended the best schools and, in time, graduated from St. Mary's Hospital Medical School in London, and went on to become known throughout the world as the noted Sir Alexander Fleming, the discoverer of Penicillin.

Years afterward, the same nobleman's son who was saved from the bog was stricken with pneumonia. What saved his life this time? Penicillin. The name of the nobleman? Lord Randolph Churchill. His son's name? Sir Winston Churchill.

(Lectio Divina). (COMMENT: (This is a baseless Internet rumor, <https://www.snopes.com/fact-check/what-goes-around/> , but it makes a Great story! It also gives us an idea of the things we must do and of the fruitfulness that our actions and attitude must produce in order that the peace of God "that passes understanding" may reach us all. (<https://frtonyshomilies.com/>) L/23