

Sermon preached by

The Reverend William J. Eakins

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What makes a man amass an arsenal of guns, climb into a tower, and then rain down a hailstorm of bullets upon a crowd beneath? What makes people rally behind a cry of "America First!" or "*Deutschland über alles?*" What makes children love to play King of the Mountain? What is it about us human beings that makes us want to be at the top, in control, the master or mistress of all we survey? Is there something about ourselves that we should learn from the dark parable that is this morning's Gospel?

A landowner plants a vineyard and hires tenants to look after it with the proviso that they give him his share of the fruit in due season. But when the harvest comes, the tenants refuse to honor the deal. They want to keep everything for themselves. The rebellious tenants stop at nothing, even murdering the owner's son in their determination to claim the vineyard as their own.

The parable dramatizes the struggle that goes on not just between us human beings, but also between us and God. At its heart, the struggle is about who is in charge.

In ancient Israel, the image of vineyard and tenants was a familiar way of speaking about the nation and its God. We heard it in the reading from Isaiah. Just as a landowner might lavish care on the planting of a choice vineyard, so the Lord God had showered blessings upon Israel. The people had been rescued from slavery in Egypt and brought to a new land flowing with milk and honey. But just as a vineyard owner looks for the day when the land on which he has devoted such care will produce a good crop of grapes, so God looks for the nation of Israel to bring forth the fruit of just living. Isaiah's complaint, like that in Jesus' parable, is that Israel has rebelled against God. Isaiah declares that it is Israel's indifference to justice which is the great mark of their rebellion. Those in power have come to think that everything belongs to them and not to God, that the land and its people are their possessions to do with as they please.

We are of course no different from the people to whom Isaiah prophesied and for whom Jesus told his parable. All too readily we fall into the delusion that we are the owners and not the caretakers of our lives and what we regard as our possessions. And for us as well as for Israel, the self-centeredness and selfishness of our personal and corporate lives, the desire to be at the top with others below us are the tell-tale signs of our rebellious delusion of ownership.

A man I know was just starting out in life and had very little. For a number of years, he lived in a small apartment and worked hard to get ahead. Then he got a promotion, married and bought a house, but he hardly had any furniture to put in it. A generous friend offered to help him out. This friend had inherited a good deal of antique furniture, so much that he had had to put it into storage. "Look," said the friend, "you can borrow whatever you need from me and do us both a favor: I'll save on storage and you'll have your house furnished." A letter of agreement was drawn up, and a number of years went by until the furniture owner's daughter got married and wanted the family furniture that her father had loaned out. When the father told his friend that he would have to return the furniture, the friend was upset. You see, over the years he had grown very fond of the furniture in his care. In fact, he had come to regard it as his own and resented having to give it back.

The same thing happens to all of us. All too readily we grow accustomed to thinking that our lives and all that we have belong to us. We own them. We are in charge. We can do with them what we please. With that frame of mind, one class of people can think that it is entitled to more than another class of people and starts lording it over them. A nation can think that it has a right to a greater share of the earth's resources than other nations, that the needs of its citizens are more important than those of other countries. Insular and selfish foreign policies and even wars are the result.

The Scriptures challenge us to think differently. They confront us with the truth that we are not the owners that we suppose we are; we are merely caretakers. The planet on which we live and all the resources that it provides all belong not to us but to God. We are the stewards of what God has entrusted into our keeping. Remembering the account that we must one day give, we are to use our time, our energy, our ability, our wealth, not just to satisfy our needs and desires, but to carry out what will benefit all of God's people. So it is that as a nation we Americans must consider what changes need to be made to put a stop on the epidemic of gun violence which continues to claim victims with sickening regularity. And if increased regulation, like requiring background checks and restricting devices like bump stocks, offers the promise of reducing gun violence, we must support that regulation even if it seems like a loss of personal freedom.

Can we hear God's message about stewardship as Good News? I suspect that there are many who find the notion of being a steward, instead of an owner, unattractive. Stewardship sounds demeaning, second-rate. Properly understood, however, being a steward is a high and noble calling: it is being God's partner in the management of the riches of creation.

Seeing ourselves as stewards, not owners, actually opens our lives to God. As long as our minds and our hearts are shut up in our own petty kingdoms, God will always be on the outside of our lives. Though sovereign, we shall always be lonely and though possessing many things, we shall always be poor. When, however, we surrender to the proposition that our lives are not our own and that all that we are and all that we have belong to God, we shall in that very sense of belonging, find a peace and satisfaction we could find in no other way. It's what Jesus meant when he said that those who save their lives will lose them and those who lose their lives for his sake will find them.

It is still God's mission to call us out of our petty and rebellious kingdoms of selfishness, isolation and greed and to surrender ourselves to God's gracious and all-encompassing rule. Faithfully, gently, persistently, God claims us as citizens of God's Kingdom. Like the landowner in the parable, God even sends his own Son to call us to our senses. But unlike the landowner in the parable, God does not bring death upon us for our waywardness but calls us from the cross to turn from our prideful possessiveness and live.