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This grim-sounding parable of the wicked tenants is about several things all at the same time.

On one level, while this story may have started out as a much simpler parable from Jesus, by the time Matthew gets finished with it, it has become something different; it has become an allegory told against the religious leaders of the day. (We'll see Matthew do the same thing again next week.) Anyway, the scene is the week of the crucifixion, and Jesus is in the Jerusalem temple, arguing with the Chief Priests and the Pharisees. In this context, this meaning of the story is unmistakable. Those whom God entrusted with special responsibility for the care and protection of his people and his community have failed. (Remember, stories about vineyards are always stories about Israel.) These leaders have chosen to enrich themselves at the cost of those they are to serve. They have ignored God and killed his prophets; and they are about to do something worse than that.

There is no doubt that on this level Jesus is talking *about* the people he is talking *to*; and they knew it. As soon as Jesus finishes telling the parable the religious authorities try, for the first time, to have him arrested. The stakes are being raised, and the final conflict has now clearly begun. That's one piece of the meaning of this story; and it is an important piece in many ways, especially in the development of the Gospel narrative. But it's not particularly immediate or personal. It's about them, those old guys way back then—and so it happily leaves us alone.

But there is another level of meaning here that does not leave us alone at all; but that can, if we let it, get right in our faces. Maybe the best way into that is by taking another look at the bad guys, the wicked tenants, and to try to see things from their perspective. After all, they haven't had much in the way of good press; and yet their way of looking at things is, upon reflection, pretty familiar.

Think about it—the tenants did all of the work, and if it weren't for them, there would be no working vineyard, no grapes, no wine, no profits, no nothing. They were there every day, they worried and fussed about the weather, they tended the vines, chased off the birds, stomped on the bugs, and hauled the water. They repaired the wall and pruned the vines; they picked and cleaned the grapes.

They watched out for thieves and generally defended the place. Then they did it all over again. No one else did any of that.

The owner guy, whoever he was, was more rumor than reality. He did nothing helpful, useful or visible. He was a long ways away, had apparently given up on them, and was probable sitting on his fat can, sipping marguerites and clipping coupons on some distant beach. If he wanted to have anything to do with them, he could get himself in gear, show up, and make a contribution. Regardless of what he may have done a long time ago, it was very clear that he hadn't done anything for them lately.

It's not hard to think like that, is it? It's not hard to get inside their skin. And when you do, when you put yourselves in their place this way, then what do you do when some folks from out of town, carrying a briefcase, show up and say that this so called owner has sent them to tell you that he (the owner) really controls that vineyard you've been working in, and that he wants a good chunk of your income for the last year? What do you do?

Yeah, that's what you do. After all, possession is nine-tenths of the law; and all the work they had done easily made up the other tenth. That owner fellow was asking for what they figured was by all rights theirs. And when it comes to what is yours by right, well, you do what you have to do.

And once the tenants started doing what they had to do—that is, once they had started beating up on and otherwise disposing of the messengers, then the darndest thing happened. Nothing. That is, they would run off one bunch of collectors and nothing happened except another bunch just like them showed up. That was no problem; they had already figured out what to do with the likes of them. They just did it harder the next time.

By sending these messengers over and over, the owner must have seemed like he was going soft in the head, or had become a gutless wimp. It never occurred to them that he was being patient in the hope of their repentance. Instead, it seemed that he just kept on with the same strategies well after they had been proven ineffective. Meanwhile, the tenants still had the vineyard; and they still had all of their stuff; and they were only defending what was theirs—what they had worked for, what they had earned. Once they had some momentum built up, the bit of nastiness with the son made perfect sense. The owner clearly wasn't going to do anything more severe than he had already done, and maybe the tenants figured that disposing of the son would be the excuse the owner wanted to just forget the whole thing and leave them alone with what belonged to them.

This business of how we look at things, how we understand ourselves and our world, this is fundamental; it makes all the difference. In this parable, (and in lots of other places,) it all comes down to one four-letter word. The tenants looked at all there was around them, at what they started with and at what they had done, and they labeled it all with the same word, they said “Mine”.

Everything that happened, everything they did after that, followed quite easily and quite sensibly from that one action, that single perspective on their lives. If you start there, the rest comes naturally.

I suspect that one abiding insight we can bring from this parable to ourselves and our lives is that we have a choice. We can choose the perspective, the context, we bring to our world and to our lives. And there is great power to this; there are real consequences to this. We can say of the things and the people and the stuff of the world, of whatever makes up our own particular little vineyard, we can say of it MINE—mine to own, mine to control, mine to defend, mine to do with whatever I choose. That leads to one sort of life, a life we saw taken to the extreme with those tenants; a life we can all recognize.

Or, we can look at the same world, the same life, the same vineyard, and we can say HIS. His by virtue of creation, his to own—ours to care for, to manage responsibly, to use and to share thankfully—ours to have with gratitude and not with greed; and ours to hold on to, well, not too tightly, a sort of constant practice for the final giving up of it and everything we can't take with us. His to own, ours to use.

MINE, or HIS. Same stuff, same life, same vineyard, but two totally different worlds. And the difference matters, it matters very much.

Meanwhile, as the parable makes very clear, God waits, and God calls us to his vision of his world and his life and his people. He keeps sending us the word that we need to have something to do with him; that we need to pay attention to him, that we have obligations and responsibilities to the owner. He is calling us, and we can choose, and, again, that choice makes a real difference.