

## ***"Wicked Tenants"***

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Let's join our hearts together in prayer. Let us pray: **Gracious and loving God, help us to be good tenants. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.**

*Sports Illustrated* told of a college football coach who was faced with the possibility that his star player might be declared academically ineligible, so he pleaded with the math professor not to flunk him. "Tell you what, coach," said the math professor, "I'll ask him a math question in your presence. If he gets it right, I'll pass him." The athlete was called in, and the math professor asked, "What's two plus two?" The player replied, "Four." But then, frantically, the football coach cried, "Give him another chance! Give him another chance!"

In our reading from the gospel according to Matthew this morning, the landowner, who had gone to another country, gave his tenants another chance, and another chance, and another chance. First, the landowner sent three servants to collect the fruits of the harvest from his vineyard, but the wicked tenants beat one, killed another and stoned the third. The gracious landowner gave his wicked tenants another chance and he sent more servants, but they were treated the same way. Then the landowner gave the wicked tenants another chance and sent his own son to try to sort things out, but the wicked tenants threw the son out of the vineyard and killed him. Jesus asks the chief priests and Pharisees who were confronting him, "When the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?" And the chief priests and Pharisees respond with vengeance, wanting the landowner to get even and seek retribution, saying, "He will put those wretches to a miserable death."

Has anyone ever had tenants in a rental property or in an apartment in your home? If so, you'll know that good tenants can be hard to come by. There are a few good rules of thumb for landlords: first, a tenant's ability to see dirt and damage is much greater when they move in than when they move out; second, everything in your rental space will break 100 times faster than in your own home; and third, that sweet young girl that you accept as a tenant will start dating a motorcycle gang leader right after she moves in.

Even God had trouble with tenants. God created the beautiful fruit producing Garden of Eden and dwelt there at times, and then God created Adam and Eve to be tenants in the Garden. Adam and Eve didn't obey the provisions of their lease and had to be evicted. Later, God had Moses lead the Israelites on a long journey to the Promised Land and they were evicted for a while there too. And then in the New Testament, God allowed the chief priests and Pharisees to be tenants in God's holy temple in Jerusalem. Historically, we know that the Jerusalem Temple was destroyed in 70 AD, effectively evicting all of the religious leaders a short time before Matthew wrote his gospel.

Genelle Guzman McMillan was the last person to be rescued from the collapse of the twin towers of the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001. This 30-year-old single mother had been trapped in the rubble for 27 hours when at last, firefighters heard her calling and pulled her out.

By her own description, Genelle was a Catholic who had become a "party-girl" and was living with her boyfriend in Brooklyn. But when the North Tower collapsed, Genelle's thoughts immediately turned to God and her 14-year-old daughter. At first, she prayed that her body would be found so that it could be buried. Becoming bolder, she revised her prayer and asked the Lord that if she had to die, that she could at least make it to the

hospital so she could see her daughter one last time. But as faith seemed to bubble in her heart, she boldly asked God to be rescued alive. She said, "I was praying to God: 'God please save my life. Give me a second chance. I promise I will change my life and do your will.'" Genelle kept her promise, and her faith has deepened.

Jesus' parable of the wicked tenants is an allegory where the landowner who seems distant to us, is God. The wicked tenants are the chief priests and Pharisees who are acting in opposition to God's will. The first group of servants are the Former Prophets sent by God to rebellious Israel (described in Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings). The larger second group of servants are the Latter Prophets (from Isaiah to Malachi). The landowner's son is Jesus, the Son of God who will die at the hands of the religious leaders. And the new good tenants are the members of the Christian church, the followers of Jesus who are doing the will of God – that's us.

As in the parable of the two sons last week, the chief priests and Pharisees incriminate themselves. This time, it's in their passion to respond with vengeance against the wicked tenants. But this is not Jesus' response. Jesus quotes from Psalm 118, the same psalm that the people shouted when Jesus entered Jerusalem on a donkey the previous day; a psalm of praise sung at Passover. Jesus refers to himself as the cornerstone when he quotes: "The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord's doing, and it is amazing in our eyes."

It's interesting that the crowds strongly influence the chief priests and Pharisees who wanted to arrest Jesus, and that they feared the crowds. Later, the crowds will also impact the decisions of the chief priests in the passion accounts, where the crowds demand that Jesus be crucified and allow Barabbas to go free. It's a warning to be careful about the whims of public opinion and to seek God's will in all that we do.

It's also interesting that Jesus uses the image of God as a landowner who has gone to another country. God sometimes seems to us to be distant. God has left enough distance for us to determine our own fruitfulness and to make our own mistakes, even as God sends messengers of God's will into our midst. God even sent God's own son who continues to love us, and to encourage us to be good tenants.

The Apostle Paul used to be the Pharisee Saul before meeting the risen Christ on the road to Damascus. In Lorraine's reading from Paul's letter to the Philippians, Paul reflects on his privileged prior life as a Pharisee: he had the best possible credentials that any Jewish person could have. Paul was Jewish by birth; he was from the tribe of Benjamin, one of Jacob's favourite sons; and he was a Pharisee, a faithful and strict upholder of the Jewish law. Then Saul was awakened: awakened from pride in his own status and achievements; awakened to an attitude of gratitude for his call to a new way of living in the unmerited gift of the love of God.

There are still lots of wicked tenants in the world. But the Pharisee Saul changed his mind, like the first son changed his mind last week. We're given lots of opportunities to change our minds to do the will of God. Paul gives thanks for Christ and for righteousness "that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith." For this righteousness we're grateful and we give thanks to God for Jesus, the cornerstone of our faith. Amen.