

“Rebellion in the Garden”

Date: Oct. 2, 2011

Place: Lakewood UMC

Text: Matthew 21:33-46

Theme: Stewardship; God’s ownership

Occasion: World Communion Sunday,

There is a wonderful story about two men from Mars who decided to do a little sight-seeing on Earth. They realize that to avoid causing panic they must appear as inconspicuous as possible. They obtain American clothing, learn the language, and in general make themselves as ordinary as possible.

During their first day on Earth nobody notices a thing unusual about them. At the end of the day they celebrate their successful adventure at an exclusive restaurant. As they are paying their check, they are astonished to hear the cashier say, “You guys must be from Maras!” “What?” asked the dumbfounded Martians. “How can you tell?”

“Well,” said the cashier, “you’re the first customers to pay cash since I’ve been working here.

There were times when Jesus tried to communicate profound truths to those around him, and they acted as if he were from Mars. He would say something and he could watch their eyes glaze over. Particularly, he had difficulty getting through to the religious officials of his day. They wanted nothing to do with him or his teachings. They condemned him without even listening to him.

What would you do in that situation? You are trying to communicate something important, but they just don’t get it. You’re not getting through. That was the situation that Jesus found himself in. So, he did what he often did. He told a story. He told a story that communicates some key information about our role in HIS kingdom. Remember, it is His kingdom, and yet we have a responsibility to be good stewards.

I won't tell you the story over again. I'm assuming you were listening the first time I told it. There was rebellion in the vineyard. The tenants killed the landlord's son.

Rebellion is an ancient theme in the Bible. It is the story of Adam and Eve. It is the story of the Tower of Babel. It is the story of the children of Israel during the Exodus. And the result is always the same - alienation, heartbreak and tragedy.

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 kingdom, and we are supreme over all we survey. And we forget that everything we have is on loan to us from God. We are temporary tenants. In actuality, we don't own anything, even though we sometimes act as if we own it all. Everything ultimately belongs to God. Another story:

There was a church located next door to a supermarket. Since the church was short on parking spaces, and the supermarket was closed on Sundays, the church leader asked the owner of the market for permission to park in his lot. The owner's response was, "Fine. You are welcome to use it 51 weeks a year." "What about the other week?" the church members asked. "That week," said the owner of the market, "I'll chain off the lot, so you'll always remember that the lot belongs to me, and not to the church."

Good point! We act like owners, when we are only tenants. Today we celebrate World Communion Sunday. Christians all over the world are celebrating communion today, remembering that we are one body in Christ. We live in a world in which people fight over land, and water and property and mineral rights and so forth. We act as if we created the wealth of the world.

In truth, it all belongs to God. And since we are all members of the family of

God, we should learn how to share the resources of the world. We did not make the valuable resources that are ours to enjoy. God owns the vineyard, and we are only tenants. And we are all asked to share the land, and to share the water, and to share the resources. What a difference it would make if we as adults could remember the lessons we learned when playing in the sandbox. “No hitting, no fighting, and share the toys.”

Which brings me to the second point. Happiness comes to those who understand they own nothing. These tenants in our lesson were greedy. They wanted everything for themselves, and were unwilling to give the landowner his fair share. The landowner, on the other hand, was quite generous. He had given them control of his vast estate. All he asked in return was a share of the produce.

Sounds like you and me, doesn't it? Sounds like every person who has ever walked this earth. God has provided for us so abundantly. All God asks is a small portion in return. But we are greedy. We want to withhold what is rightfully God's. How sad. The happiest people who have ever lived, are those who gratefully acknowledge the ownership of God.

Today is not Stewardship Sunday, but there is a stewardship message here for us. Everything we own is a loan from God. Someday it will be passed on to somebody else. Don't you see? No matter how rich we are, if we are not rich towards God, we don't have anything! The vineyard belongs to Him. Happiness is found in recognizing our place as His tenants, His stewards.

But there is one more thing to be said. We have another important responsibility. Jesus asked the religious officials what the owner of the vineyard should do to the rebellious tenants. They had no trouble answering him. “He will put those wretches to death, and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give

him the produce at the harvest time.”

Little did they know that they were condemning themselves with their answer. You see the parable was about them. They had been entrusted with the spiritual care of God’s people. Unfortunately, many of them looked upon it only as a way of earning a good living and a source of prestige and power.

They were so set in their ways that they stoned the prophets who threatened their comfortable life. And eventually, they crucified God’s own son. Jesus’ parable came true in a powerful way. The tenants, or the Pharisees, did indeed kill the landowners son, God’s Son, Jesus. That’s a warning to every one of us involved in religious work, whether as clergy or as laity. We have a responsibility.

Our role as Christians is not just to keep the church open and running. We do not exist solely for the purpose of helping the United Methodist denomination survive. I recently read a quote that struck home with me. It said, “Any institution committed to

survival will die; rather than a passion for its cause which launched it.”

If we spend all of our energy working just to keep the church going, we are bound to fail. But if we live with the passion which started the church, the love of Jesus Christ, then we will not only survive, but we will grow. Are we in survival mode, like the Pharisees? Or rather, are we living with a passion to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world?

This is not our church. It is God’s church. We are only tenants. Stewards. We have a responsibility to return to God a portion of what is already His, and to use that which we have received to God’s glory.

I am so pleased to announce to you today that the Mission Committee

of our church is alive and well and functioning. Some time ago we launched a campaign, in conjunction with our Conference, called No More Malaria. We set a goal of raising \$3,000 for that cause. We have reached that goal, having already sent \$3,247.70 for that campaign. We are still receiving funds, because the need is still there.

But we are shifting our focus. This World Communion Sunday is the occasion for us to announce that we are changing our focus to address the horrible plight of our African brothers and sisters. Terrible drought in the Horn of Africa is devastating the lives and livelihoods of 12 million people. Thousands of lives are being lost each day. Food and water is desperately needed.

You'll be hearing more about this effort in the weeks and months to come. But for now, let us remember the parable of the vineyard. The blessings that are ours to enjoy are a gift from God, but not merely for our pleasure and enjoyment. God wants us to return a portion to Him, for His glory. We do so when we help our brothers and sisters in need. When asked, I hope you'll give generously.

There is one earth, and we all must share the resources. There is only one race - the human race. And we must all learn to get along. And there is only one Body of Christ, and today we celebrate that on World Communion Sunday. May God be glorified as we celebrate our oneness in Christ, in the bread and the cup. Amen.

