

# Fruits of the Kingdom

Matthew 21:33-46

Sermon preached by Zac Koons at St. Mark's Episcopal Church on October 4, 2020

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The tenants of this parable do seem particularly wicked, and perhaps that is what keeps us from having sympathy with their perspective, but let's put ourselves in their shoes for a moment. The parable starts with a landowner; and one gets the sense that this is not the only land he owns, because obviously he lives somewhere else. In fact it sounds very much like the landowner is one of *those* people, with multiple lake houses, a mountain house, and a farm just outside the city for those quick Saturday escapes. The landowner is like the absentee majority shareholder who knows virtually nothing about the day-to-day operations of the business but nonetheless once a year announces a "bold new direction" for the company that will affect the lives and jobs of thousands. He is the venture capitalist in the shadows whose money you need in order to pursue your wildest dreams but who in return receives the ability to change your dream along the way into whatever it is that will make them even more money. Yes, murder seems a bit much, but can we blame the tenants for nurturing a little resentment towards the landowner?

Bear in mind: a newly planted vineyard won't produce fruit for at least four years. So that's four years worth of blood, sweat, and tears the tenants have put into the daily operation of this vineyard. And four years of, we presume, nothing but sipping chardonnay on a balcony far, far away for the landowner. That's four years for resentment to harden into hatred, hatred that, when harvest time comes and it turns out the landowner has the gall to not even show up himself but instead sends a slave to do nothing but collect his profits, will boil over into violence and even murder.

But what the tenants are doing is not just reacting in vengeful emotion; they are acting according to a premeditated strategy of mutiny. According to the ancient laws, landowners were required to maintain regular contact with the lands they owned or else ownership would pass to whoever the current tenants were if a certain amount of time was allowed to pass. So, while killing the son of your landlord is not usually an effective means of stealing someone's inheritance, in this case what it appears they are doing is trying to scare off the owner from ever coming back so that they will come to own the vineyard themselves. The moral of the story, Jesus says at the end, is that "the kingdom of God will be taken away from [them] and given to a people that produce the fruits of the kingdom."

This is a parable about the history of Israel. God is the landowner. Israel is the vineyard. The tenants are the religious leaders. The slaves sent by the landowner are the prophets of the Old Testament. The son, of course, is Jesus. This is also a parable for the church today. God is still the landowner. The vineyard is now the whole world. And the new tenants are the Church. The question is, what kind of tenants will we be?

Looking back through the history of the Church, it is not clear to me that we have, on the whole, fared better than the religious leaders of ancient Israel. In fact, I am not at all convinced that if Jesus were to come again among us in the flesh today, that we wouldn't decide to kill him again. (The literary types among you may recall Dostoyevsky's parable of the Grand Inquisitor in *The Brothers Karamazov* when he makes precisely this

prediction.) But still, it is worth considering how the contours of this parable apply to us at St. Mark's, and how it might help us think about the future.

The challenging truth of the parable is, it is all too easy for us to share the perspective the wicked tenants had. That is, because we humans carry more-or-less the day-to-day operational responsibility for the world around us, we very quickly fall under the assumption that we own it, and that it is ours to do what we want with. And what we tend to want to do with it is the same thing the tenants wanted to do—to maximize the amount of money we can get from it. It is not wrong or even too simplistic to say that this mentality is the chief cause of climate change or for global wealth inequality. But it plays out even in the micro-scales of our individual lives. We get a paycheck and we think the money is ours. We buy a house and we believe we own it. As long as we pay for the water that comes out of the sink we can use as much of it as we want. After all, we worked hard for the things that we have, for the life that we have, for the future security that we enjoy.

But of course, we are not the owners of anything. God is the owner of everything. God is more than the owner; God is the creator. This is why the Bezos-like comparisons I opened with don't apply to God. God didn't buy the world, God created the world. God even created us, his tenants. And a better word in this case is stewards. Because we don't even pay God rent to live here. But all the same we have been charged to tend to the vineyard of this world, and to work it not with an eye towards maximizing returns, but such that we produce the fruits of the kingdom of God.

Jesus loves the fruit metaphor when talking about the life of discipleship. He returns to it over and over again in the Gospels. Bear fruit worthy of repentance. You will know them by their fruits. Whoever abides in me will bear much fruit. St. Paul takes it up in his letters and talks about the fruits of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Producing fruit is an organic process through which we and the world are nourished—mind, body, and soul. Producing these fruits of the kingdom of God is not a bad way to summarize our vocation as individual Christians in the world. And it's not a bad way to summarize our collective mission as the Church.

Early October marks the time when we at St. Mark's launch our annual stewardship campaign. Which is code for this is the time of year when the vestry is prayerfully crafting next year's budget. Which is code for this is when we ask you to prayerfully consider what your financial commitment might be to our parish for next year, and then invite you one month from now to write down that commitment in the form of a pledge. But don't let this vocabulary make you slip into a panic or a moan. The important thing to understand is that all of this is just code for what we have been talking about up to now: A church budget, your financial support, your tithe, is all code for producing fruits of the kingdom.

That is what the church does at its best. It takes the money that it is given, and it transforms it into fruit. For example, it transforms money into bread and wine that then through prayer is transformed again into the body and blood of Christ that sustains our souls by transforming us time and time again into the body of Christ. Money, this year, was turned into some camera equipment for virtual worship and big wagons to carry all our outdoor service supplies. Money is transformed into staff who dedicate their lives to helping you on your journey of discipleship, whether it is planning music that feels like a preview of heaven on earth, by designing, implementing, and training others in a set of safety protocols so we can worship in-person as safely as possible,

by reinventing children's ministry overnight by lovingly crafting individual Kids' Club packets each week so your children don't come to believe that God, like everybody else in their lives right now, lives in the computer. Money is given to me and to Mary to support our families so we are free to be your priests with our whole lives—to baptize, to celebrate, to preach, to pastor, and to teach, to be there for burial and new birth.

In addition to these things, especially in this last year, your money has been transformed into local mission and outreach. We decided as a community in the very early days of the pandemic that economic uncertainty wasn't going to make us react in fear by battening down the hatches and conserving as much money as possible for the future. Instead, recognizing our community as one more privileged than most, we announced right away that we were going to do the opposite. We were going to give more money away than we ever have before. And you all responded to that call with generosity this church has never seen before. Many of you gave over and above your pledge gifts so we as a church could support local organization on the frontlines, totaling about \$19,000, meaning we will easily triple our mission giving this year over last. And that money has been transformed by God through our church into rental assistance for those who have lost job, into food for the hungry, into housing for the homeless, into stipends for artists who lost work, into aid for those suffering on the border, and into support for organizers addressing racial injustice in our city.

Within the logic of the parable, the stewardship season is the season for sowing seeds. That's all a church budget is. It looks like an Excel spreadsheet. But really what it is is a list of seeds that we hope grow into the fruit of God's kingdom. It has been a bizarre year in just about every way. And it has brought more loss and brokenness than any of us would have expected. But from where I sit, this year has also brought forth a lot of fruit. And I truly believe that underneath all the various crises we are living in, God is at work renewing His church and our church

The question for your household to discuss, the question to pray about together, the question my wife and I will be discussing and praying over together this next month is what do we want next year's harvest to look like? What kind of tenant, what kind of steward, do we want to be? It is possible that we know less about what the next year will look like than any church budget we have planned before. We know even if a vaccine comes soon we will be living with effects of this crisis for a while still. But what will be true no matter what is that the whole world remains our vineyard. And our vocation, which is also our delight, which is also the source of our own nourishment, is that we get to tend seeds into fruit that will last. So I invite you to join me in the sowing, and to get excited with me about the harvest.

Amen.