

You can hear rats rummaging through your cupboards. You wake up to cockroaches crawling across your bed. The faucet leaks. The front door sticks. The kitchen cabinets squeek. Water damage has left a hole in your ceiling with light peering through from the apartment above. Several questionable characters have begun selling drugs out of the unlocked basement in your building. The toilet? Well, let's just say it isn't pretty. The radiator turns all 600 square feet of your abode into a sauna in the winter, and the lackluster A/C unit strapped precariously inside your only window ensures it stays just as toasty during the summer.

Sadly, for many New York Residents, living in a dangerous and disgusting apartment is a tough reality. With housing scarce, and affordable rent almost nonexistent, a good number of New Yorkers find themselves at the mercy of real-life slumlords, who hold their tenants hostage with insanely cheap rent, yet in return they refuse to maintain the facilities they own according to even the most modest of living standards. Such problems are actually quite common and have existed throughout history.

In fact, in our gospel from Matthew today, Jesus offers a parable about what else, a rough relationship between an owner and tenants. However, in Jesus' story, the roles are reversed. It's not the landlord who abuses his power and fails to care for those living on his land. No, it's the tenants who take advantage of the landowner's trust and generosity.

In our narrative Jesus had just entered the final week of his life, and it was time for any doubts about his mission and message -- among both his disciples and enemies alike -- to be cleared away. It was time to get serious, to clarify things, so Jesus lays out an accusatory parable for his followers and for the religious leaders listening to him teach. And in doing so, he opened the oven, cranked it to 450 degrees, and filled the air around him with blistering heat, thus bringing his ministry in Jerusalem to a rolling boil.

The message was clear. God is like a landlord who has leased his vineyard -- his kingdom -- to Israel as laborers. The time has come for God to demand fruit from his workers. He wants to see faith in his promises, repentance of sin, and trust in his messengers. He wants his vineyard producing a wine that leaves the boundaries of His kingdom, so that he might fill the entire world with the goodness of what he grows. But rather than produce a measurable crop for the owner, the residents of the vineyard have sat on their hands and have nothing to show or offer up. As if that weren't bad enough, they've ignored the land lord's warnings of eviction and have murdered every agent, or better yet prophet, that he'd sent to represent his interests.

"Enough is enough," Jesus proclaims. The time had finally arrived when "the kingdom of God would be taken away from them and given to a people who would actually produce the fruit of good works." But to be clear, God is no nasty slumlord. Israel, however, was an unfaithful, unfruitful tenant. The time of eviction had come. The time for new tenants -- faith-filled, Messiah-following, cross-focused tenants -- had arrived. Soon after saying all of this, Jesus would be arrested. Go figure!

Here's the thing. It's tempting for Christians today, you know, the new tenants manning the vineyard, to read these words as simply a rebuke of the old guard. But that would be terribly shortsighted. Think about it, if you were renting an apartment, or a house, and if your landlord felt the need to recount stories of previous renters, who failed to pay on time, threw parties that garnered visits from the police, and who dared to paint walls without permission, he's not simply reminiscing about the past. He's offering instructions for you to follow right now!

To be sure, God isn't about to kick the church out of the kingdom and isn't about to start from scratch. That's not in the plan. This parable is not a threat to us, but it can be highly instructive for us, if we are willing to take it to heart. From it

we can discern what God's expectations are for those who've been given the task of living in his kingdom, producing fruit, and sending His wine of his mercy, grace, and love into the world. In other words, this is a parable about stewardship. You know, managing God's stuff on God's behalf, and there are two central aspects of stewardship. The first is what we've been entrusted with, and the second *is what we're supposed to do with it.*

As tenants we've each been entrusted with two things: the gospel of Jesus Christ and our personal, worldly goods. Both come from God, and both are to be used by us in service to God. In case we need a bit of a reminder, the Gospel, the good news we possess, is the message that despite humankind's universal rebellion against God's authority, God desires a reconciled relationship with us. God has pursued us through the sending of his Son and has made reconciliation possible through that same Son's sacrificial death on the cross. Because of the cross, the entire world is now welcome to enter the vineyard and labor under God's love. God has not only blessed us through that message but has also made us the dispensers of it.

We must also recognize that all things -- the clothes on our backs, the dollars in our wallets, and even the rented or owned ceilings above our heads, belong to God and are on loan to us from God. King David reminds us of this in Psalm 24, "the earth is the Lord's and everything in it" God owns everything. It's simply been leased to us. "We brought nothing into the world, and we cannot take anything out of the world." *We are renters of everything and owners of nothing.*

But as we see in our parable this morning, it takes more than simply knowing how blessed we are and who the owner is to be considered faithful. Even the jerks in Jesus' parable understood all that. No, a good tenant, a solid steward *does something* with the gospel and the goods he or she has been given. They

produce a crop. They make sure that both the gospel and their goods leave the vineyard in a way that will bring blessing to the world at large.

Now I won't ask you to raise your hands, but when was the last time you invited someone to watch one of our online worship videos, or to join us for our Drive-up worship? How long has it been since you last read the Bible with your children? Have you yet matured to the place where you can pray for a coworker, or serve here at First Lutheran helping us do ministry in some way? Have you experienced any type of growth in the knowledge of your faith? What kind of crop, or fruit, are you producing with the gospel?

Likewise, how are you doing at managing your goods? Is there anyone out there who could tell a story of being blessed by your generous sharing of goods at a time when their own vineyard felt empty and bare? When was the last time some of your stuff -- correction, *God's stuff* -- blessed someone else? Are you aware that our congregation does a lot of wonderful and fruitful things with the harvest that has been made available to us? We share the Gospel message in all kinds of different ways outside the walls of our church by: making meals for friendship house, donating food for Neighbors in Need, collecting clothing for local school children, tying quilts for Lutheran World relief, and I'm certain you can probably think of even more ways we share the love of Jesus with others!

Apparently the Village Voice, a weekly tabloid in New York, decided to turn the tables in the debate over terrible landlords. Similar to the role reversal offered up by Jesus in today's Gospel, the paper ran an article noting that for every bad owner there are equally evil renters. There are those who always need an extension, on the extension, on the extension of their rent. There's the party guy who can't help but play his music loud. There's the vandal who paints and puts holes in the walls, and who even does a bit of remodeling without permission. Not to mention the disgusting dude whose apartment is ripped from a reality television

show about compulsive hoarding. There are slumlords, it argues. But just as prevalent are slum-tenants.

This leads me to wonder, how many of us belong in that category? Too many of us tend to live as "spiritual squatters" -- inhabiting a kingdom that isn't ours and refusing to give God much of anything in return. It's an easy trap to fall into. Just ask the renters in Jesus' story. When the owner seems to be an absentee -- off in another country or seated in heaven -- one begins to wrongly assume that he's never coming back for his property, or that he truly doesn't care for it. As a result, we live as though we can do what we want, when we want. Yet we can't. We mustn't.

One Los Angeles landlord posted a rental opportunity on Craigslist. However, rather than selling others on the benefits of being his tenant, he openly admitted how horrible he was. That, or one of his disgruntled tenants decided to vent their frustrations in the form of a phony ad. Either way, it's humorous:

The add says: We take great pride in our inability to keep good tenants happy. Do you pay your rent on-time every month? We will reward you by increasing it to the maximum allowable limit every year like clockwork. Love hot water for your morning shower? Who doesn't? Well, you won't find those kinds of luxuries here. The water temperature is tepid at best. Please note that all repairs will be made by unlicensed handymen found in the Home Depot parking lot. We also like to snoop around your apartment once a month under the guise of smoke alarm checks.

If we were to write an equally honest posting about ourselves, as tenants in God's kingdom -- workers in his vineyard -- what would we say? Would we admit that we are at times incredibly ungrateful? Terribly unfruitful? Would we confess that we tend to live as if everything we've been lent by God is actually ours to keep? Thankfully, and gracefully, no matter what we'd write, the good news is this:

Because of the work of Christ, he'd still be glad to have us as his. Even if we refuse to pay our rent on time!

What kind of tenants are we? We have been entrusted with much. We are the new inhabitants of God's incredible vineyard, and life-giving wine should be flowing from us as residents of God's Kingdom here on earth. Therefore, it's time for us to be good stewards! "The season for fruit" has drawn near. No, God won't take it away from us, but God still expects much from us. We've been given the Gospel. We've been entrusted with certain goods and material possessions. Whether we live in an overpriced studio apartment or a 5,000- square-foot mansion, may it all be used to bear incredible fruit, for our divine and incredible landlord. Thanks be to God. Amen.