We meet once again the so-called wicked tenants. That’s what we call them. Wicked. Often this parable is used to talk about Israel and the Covenant; or the sending of the Son helps us understand the reception and rejection of Jesus, God’s Son.

But let me make a few additional observations—and treat this as a stewardship message:

When the landowner hired the tenants, was he or she clear? Did they have a clear job description: a timely matter as seniors negotiate contracts.

Did the tenants understand the consequences of their actions? OK, can you beat/stone/kill the landowners’ slaves and get away with it? Perhaps so in that time in history. Slaves were property like the vineyard. The tenants treat the slaves as they do the vineyard. Their private property.

Killing the heir to the vineyard was not wise. This becomes in the parable a kingdom question. Who will be in the kingdom that Jesus will give his life for?

Let us conclude that there was a fatal flaw in the logic or actions of the tenants. They forgot that they were renters not landowners. Somehow they concluded that the planted vineyard with a fence, wine press and watchtower was their possession, their private property. They came after the vineyard was established. They were hired to care for the vineyard. They were renters, tenants for an absentee landowner. They were inhabitants of someone else’s property.

On the first Sunday of Lent, remember Jesus’ encounter with Satan. Satan tried to enter Jesus’ world, Jesus’ house. But Jesus was clear. He was living in God’s house and could not make the decisions Satan wanted. He rejected Satan because he was God’s Son.

Most of us have trouble being clear about what is ours; what belongs to another person; and what belongs to God. Like the tenants we make wrong assumptions. We use poor judgment. What we do with money is not unlike what the tenants tried to do with the vineyard. Jesus called them on it. So he does the same with us. Jesus calls us on treating our lives and all we have as private property.

The tenants made an idol of the vineyard. The idolatry of money has “its most grotesque form as a doctrine of immortality,” so the lay theologian William Stringfellow concluded.

For Christian tenants in these mortal bodies, we must live with a “freedom from idolatry of money.” That means, in Stringfellow’s mind, that money “becomes useful only as a sacrament—as a sign of the restoration of life wrought in this world by Christ.” This means that in Church the offering is not the “collection.” The world and the Church are our vineyard, by God’s grace and mission. Yes, our gift is not
part of a “collection.” Our gift of what we are and have is participation in the Body of Christ—losing our lives in order that the world be given life. Stringfellow concludes: “For their money is not their own because their lives are not their own but, but by the example of God’s own love, belong to the world.”

So the tenants missed the truth of eternity: the vineyard was “not their own.” We talk about our money, our possessions, our education, our families, our Church, our future. We are so tempted to treat our very life as the tenants treated the vineyard.

Jesus was different. His life was a life in God—and so Satan failed. This Lent we might pray to be more like Jesus than the tenants. Let us live as we pray at the beginning of the Burial of the Dead in the Book of Common Prayer:

“For none of us has life in himself,
And none becomes his own master when he dies.
For if we have life, we are alive in the Lord,
And if we die, we die in the Lord.
So, then whether we live or die,
We are the Lord’s possession.”

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