

When is the last time you heard the Ten Commandments read? Marcia just read for us what are considered the first four commandments:

- You shall have no other gods before me.
- You shall not make idols.
- You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain.
- You shall keep the Sabbath.

These four speak to our relationship with God, whereas the next six deal with our relationships with others. These four remind us that God is God and we are not.

As I read the text from the Gospel of Matthew, see if you can discern the intersection of these two texts. What about the parable Jesus tells reminds us of the first four commandments? Answering the question, “What really belongs to God?” may be our entree into understanding the intersection of the commandments and the parable we will hear Jesus tell the chief priests and elders. I want to warn you though, as the story sounds like it could be out of today’s headlines given the violence, premeditated murder and greed. Listen for God’s word to you and to us as a church this day from Matthew’s Gospel, chapter 21:

<sup>33</sup> “Listen to another parable. There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a wine press in it, and built a watchtower. Then he leased it to tenants and went to another country. <sup>34</sup> When the harvest time had come, he sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his produce. <sup>35</sup> But the tenants seized his slaves and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. <sup>36</sup> Again he sent other slaves, more than the first; and they treated them in the same way. <sup>37</sup> Finally he sent his son to them, saying, ‘They will respect my son.’ <sup>38</sup> But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, ‘This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance.’ <sup>39</sup> So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him. <sup>40</sup> Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?” <sup>41</sup> They said to him, “He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the harvest time.”

How are we all doing today? It seems that the world is coming unraveled or at the very least we hear instantaneously what has unraveled. Last week we prayed for the loved ones whose lives were cut short by gun violence at Route 91 and this week we prayed for the loved ones whose lives were claimed in the wee hours of the morning by the raging California wildfires. We have been praying for the lives impacted by natural as well as human disasters for months it feels like. Hurricanes, earthquakes, raging fires, hate filled rage in Charlottesville, car bombs in Mogadishu, and gun violence in Las Vegas. I don’t know about you, but grief seems to be palpable in so many places. Too much loss, too much devastation, too much suffering, just too much.

And then I read our parable this morning. More violence. More death. Slaves are beat. Slaves are killed. Even the vineyard owner’s son is killed. Like the psalmist, I want to cry out, “How long, O Lord?” How long?

What about you? What words do you cry out to the Lord these days?

Given the world stage, both near and far, I wonder if your moorings are secure. Is your faith on solid ground? Jesus quotes the prophet Isaiah in our New Testament passage this morning, saying, "The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone." A cornerstone is an important quality or feature on which a particular thing depends or is based. It is a stone that forms the base of a corner of a building, joining two walls. Jesus was referring to himself, for Jesus is the particular thing our life depends on. Jesus joins us together, building us in the body of Christ or as Peter says, "a spiritual house, a holy priesthood." Or as the author of Hebrews writes, "We have this hope, a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul" in Christ Jesus. Yet, do we really trust in Jesus as our anchor, our secure mooring for our lives?

"Listen to another parable," says Jesus to the chief priests and the elders, as soon as he finishes the first parable. Jesus does not even give them a chance to respond to the first parable he has told them. He just hammers the point he is trying to make yet again. Listen, chief priests and elders. Listen, because I am speaking to you. I want you to wake up, to wake up to the truth of the gospel and what that is supposed to look like in your life.

Do you remember how this section of scripture started out? It started with the chief priests and the elders asking questions of Jesus, "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?" The chief priests and the elders are part of the temple hierarchy, they are part of the power structure, they are the ones who would have granted Jesus the authority to do the things he had been doing, but they didn't. They work hard to maintain the decorum of the temple complex, to clearly follow the commandments and priestly instructions cataloged in Leviticus, they know how to delineate who is ritually clean and who is not, who is in and who is out, what is acceptable and what is not, for they are satisfied with the way things are.

The way things are has become the god whom they bow down to. The power they possess has become the god whom they serve. The temple and all the privileges it affords them has become their idol. Just like the tenants of the vineyard, the chief priests and the elders are enamored with the accumulation of power, money, land and authority.

What about you? What about us? Who or what do we bow down to? What power or powers do we serve? What privileges have become our idols? Are we enamored with power, money, possessions and authority individually or communally?

What is clear about this parable is what the chief priests and the elders are not, according to Jesus' telling of the parable. They are not the landowner who lovingly created a vineyard with all the amenities needed. They are not the landowner who entrusted the vineyard to tenants. Jesus is reminding the chief priests and the elders, through this parable, that nothing belongs to them, even though they act as if it does. Everything they have, everything that we have is on loan, leased for a period of time. As the psalmist reminds us, "The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it." (Psalm 24:1)

The tenants have been entrusted with the vineyard, a vineyard that does not belong to them. As tenants, they are to manage the vineyard and produce bountiful crops. The same holds true for the chief priests and the elders. The same holds true for you and me. We have been entrusted, with a vineyard that does not belong to us... the Jerusalem temple, this church here in Redlands, our very lives. All is on loan, nothing belongs to us.

As tenants, in the parable, they till the ground, they plant, they water, they tend and they harvest. At harvest time the owner expects to collect his produce. But the tenants decide

they don't want to give the owner any fruit and in doing so they reject the owner's authority and make it clear that they only work for themselves. They take what is not theirs and claim it for themselves.

The tenants act like they own what has been loaned to them. They forget that the land has been entrusted to them, not gifted to them. They forget the terms of the agreement and make it clear that don't want to share the proceeds. For the tenants, it is all about keeping what their hard work has produced as well as getting what is not theirs - the land.

Does this sound familiar in our own lives? Does this sound familiar in the life of this church? What has God entrusted to us? Or do we just figure, like the tenants, that it was really just our hard work that made all this possible. Our effort alone and no one else's!

The chief priests and the elders are quick to convict the tenants saying, "The landowner will put those miserable wretches to a miserable death, and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the harvest time.

Hearing their judgment Jesus makes it clear that they are judging themselves, not the supposed tenants. The chief priests and the elders are the tenants. They have occupied the vineyard that God has given them long enough to feel entitled to it. They have established rules deciding who is in and who is out. They don't want to give up what they have earned through their hard work and meticulous following of the commandments. They even make sure that prophets are silenced and that nothing changes. Fruit is produced, but it is not shared. It is only for those whom the chief priests and the elders deem worthy, like themselves!

God has given the tenants everything they needed to be fruitful, yet they kept it all for themselves. They live entitled and privileged. They do not share with God or others the bounty that they could not produce without the gift of the vineyard in the first place. As the parable ends, Jesus declares, "Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom." The chief priests and the elders have an "aha" moment and realize that Jesus is speaking about them!

What about us? Are we like the tenants in this parable, too? Do we feel entitled to everything that we have in our personal lives and in our communal life as a church? Have we forgotten that everything is on loan, that everything we have is a gift from God?

It's not just a portion of our lives, our time, our money or our church and its resources that belongs to God. Everything belongs to God! We are simply to be stewards or managers of all that has been entrusted to us and we have been entrusted with much!

It is clear through this parable that we owe something back to God. There is an expectation of us. As Brian Stoffregen writes, "We are expected to live under the authority of the Owner; to produce and give back the proper fruit."

This parable is yet another mirror for us to stand in front of. As we look at ourselves in the mirror... what do we see?

Do you recognize the gifts you have been given by God? Do you acknowledge God's authority in your life, that you are simply the steward of the one precious life you have been given?

Do we as a church, recognize the gifts we have been given by God? Do we acknowledge God's authority in the life and ministry of this church? Do we understand that we are simply stewards of what God has generously given to us?

This parable makes it bountifully clear that we, our individual lives as well as our communal life, are to bear fruit. Or as I entitled this sermon, “productivity is essential.” We are to produce something with and through our lives for God’s reign.

Now this doesn’t just mean we are supposed to just be busy doing. This doesn’t mean we are supposed to produce only to accumulate, store and hoard for ourselves. As followers of Christ, we are to produce fruit-bearing acts that bless others. Like a tree that produces bountiful fruit that blesses animals large and small. We have the responsibility to produce fruit with our lives for the sake of others, not just for ourselves.

Are you standing in front of the mirror? Are we, as a church, standing in front of the mirror of this parable?

Yesterday, I officiated a memorial service for a friend of our family. Barry had only one living relative, a nephew who lives in the State of Washington. Yet, it wasn’t his family who arranged the celebration of his life, it was his friends. Seventy-five friends from all different walks of his life gathered yesterday to bear witness to the fruit of this man’s life and as stories were told, it was clear that Barry’s life produced bountiful fruit.

The mirror of this parable though made me wonder, if any one of us had only one living relative at the time of our deaths... would friends gather together to celebrate our lives? Are our lives producing fruit that blesses others, that shares Christ’s love with others?

The same mirror can be held to a church. If this church were to close tomorrow, would our community notice? Would the community cry out and wonder who would pick up the mantle of the fruit produced through this church that blesses our community?

Jesus declared, “The kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom.” This enraged the chief priests and the elders. What about us?

Friends, do you remember the first four commandments? Let us acknowledge who owns the vineyard of life – it is God alone. We are merely recipients of God’s gifts – the gift of life and the gift of this church. And as recipients of so many gifts, productivity is essential for us as followers of Christ. Productivity is even expected, because our lives and the life of this church have been designed by God to bless others. We are designed by God to bless others, yet like the wicked tenants, it’s tempting at times to only focus on ourselves.

But, let’s not focus on ourselves, as the chief priests and the elders did. Let’s focus on others. Let’s focus on blessing others, trusting that productivity is essential for life that is really life! For we were designed to be a blessing to others! Amen.