

# **"We're Only Fooling Ourselves: You Can Believe Anything You Want!"**

**Mark 12:1-12**  
**July 4, 2010**

**John 14:1-7**  
**St. James UCC**

**Preached by Rev. Dr. Robert Matlack**

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In our text from the gospel of Mark we find the parable of the tenants in the vineyard. We're told that a man planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, made a hole for the winepress and built a watchtower - in other words he improved the property. He added all of the basic things that another farmer would be looking for in a vineyard. Then he rented out the vineyard and took off on a trip.

When harvest time came, we're told that he sent a slave to receive from the tenants his share of the harvest, for back then that was the normal arrangement between tenant and landlord. Rather than the tenant agreeing to pay a set amount of money for the use of the land - and in a bad year being unable to pay, the owner shared in the risk of running the vineyard, by receiving an agreed upon portion of the harvest as payment.

In this case the tenants aren't willing to give up a thing. They beat the slave and sent him back with nothing. The owner sends more slaves. Some are killed, some are beaten, but none are treated with respect or paid what is owed.

Finally, the only one the owner has left to send is his son. He figures that surely they will respect his son, but the tenants see this as an opportunity. This is the son, the owner's heir. If they take him out, then there will be no one to inherit the property, and it will become theirs.

We can see how the level of violence and evil has escalated. First they refuse to pay what is owed and they beat up the servant, then they move on to murder, and now they plan a premeditated murder that will allow them to steal the owner's property. These tenants have not demonstrated any respect for the owner and his rights. Rather they are caught up in doing anything to get what they want. By force, they will take what they want, seemingly no matter what the cost.

This of course is a parable that is meant to teach us about our relationship with God. By the use of allegory, Jesus is talking about the vineyard as Israel, the owner as being God, and the tenants as Israel's leaders and rulers. They have been given the opportunity to raise crops in this wonderful vineyard, but there is a responsibility that goes along with the use of God's vineyard, and as we hear in the parable, the tenants do not fulfill their responsibility. As slave after slave - or in the case of Israel prophet after prophet - has come from the owner, namely God, they have rejected and abused them, refusing to hear their words and to acknowledge the debt that they owe to God.

Think about that. It's easy to see the wrongness in the tenant's actions when it's just another parable that Jesus is telling. It's easy to cheer Jesus on when He is talking about

the Pharisees and the other Jewish leaders. But this parable is one that is meant to hit home with us as well. We too are tenants in God's vineyard. We too have responsibilities to God. In our society it's become easy for us to take a live and let live approach in which we say and even feel that it doesn't really matter what someone else believes. Some people have even come to think that it's their right to believe anything that they want.

Jesus reminds us in this parable that that isn't the way that things work. We are God's tenants. We have responsibilities and a relationship that we committed ourselves to. The owner is still in charge. We don't have the right to just randomly reject the owner. We don't have the right to do whatever we want. We don't have the right to try and steal the vineyard itself. This world in which we live does not belong to us, and we are not free to do whatever we want, for we are the tenants, not the owner.

Now when people reject God, most of the things that they do are not illegal by the laws of our society. They won't be taken into court or thrown into jail, so we think that there are no consequences, that we can get away with doing what we want. That's a temptation for us. We are blessed by the fact that we live in a nation that gives us wonderful and amazing freedoms - something that we are celebrating this weekend. Yet appropriately as a nation we recognize that we are not free to say or do anything we want. With our freedom comes responsibility - responsibility to follow the laws, respect our leadership - whether or not we agree with them about a specific issue, the responsibility to respect each other and the rights of other people. Likewise, we have responsibilities in our relationship with God. When we stop for a moment to think about all that God has done in our lives, and all that God continues to do, do we really think that God has no power, and that there are no consequences when we turn away from God?

Our text from the gospel of John adds another piece to our discussion of this issue. It begins with a message of tolerance and hope. Jesus is talking about God's house in the life to come and says, "There are many rooms in my Father's house, and I am going to prepare a place for you." I've always found that to be a wonderful image. There are many rooms in God's house. We don't all have to look or act or be exactly the same. God has created us with a tremendous variety of appearances and personalities and beliefs. For the most part that is okay, and Jesus affirms those differences.

Yet there is a limit! We aren't free to believe whatever we want or to do whatever we want... Jesus always says, "I am the way, the truth and the life; no one goes to the father except by me." In Jesus Christ God has come to each of us offering us life in all of it's fullness. When we reject that, when we turn our back on God, there is a very real consequence, for we lose a gift that is priceless and offers a richness to life that is beyond our ability to measure.

God has reached out and offered this incredible gift to us, and the limit that is placed on each of us in return is that we are called to recognize that we are not the owner of the vineyard. Instead, we need to respect and fulfill our obligations to the owner, namely to God.

We are not free to believe anything we want. We recognize that there is a wrongness inherent in the approach of terrorists, and the fact that they commit terrorist acts in the name of their faith does not make it right.

We recognize that there is a wrongness inherent in the approach of those who think that they can take what they want in life, hurting and abusing others when they get in their way.

As Christians we still have a responsibility to recognize that there is right and there is wrong. It's not our responsibility to judge others, but that doesn't mean that there isn't a very real difference between faithfulness and sinfulness. We need to be clear that there is a distinction.

Now, I don't want to minimize the many occasions in life when situations that we face seem to fall in a gray area, where it's difficult to discern exactly how God wants us to respond, and what course is the most faithful. We all encounter times like this, and these occasions are part of our faith journey, and indeed a challenge that pushes us to grow as we travel through life.

There are also times when we think that we're certain about what is right and what is wrong, only to find that it is our faith that pushes us to rethink the issue. Jesus' example of love and inclusion certainly challenges us to open our hearts and minds to new ways of living and following the example of Christ.

But in this parable, Jesus really seems to be talking about behavior that is just plain wrong. When tenants steal and kill, when we as God's tenants in this world just abuse God's trust and think only of what we can get out of the situation, there is a wrongness inherent in our actions. Jesus reminds us that there is a time when each of us will be held accountable for what we have done in life. We are not free to do whatever we want. When we abuse others because we have the power and because it helps us to get what we want, then we will pay the price.

For we are a people who belong to God. We have a responsibility to be faithful, to seek to follow and to serve. We have a responsibility to try and live the way that God wants us to live, the way that God expects us to live, even when that is not the easy or popular choice.

The tenants in this parable were consumed with their immediate concerns. They were looking at what would benefit them the most right now. They wanted to be the owners of the vineyard, and they thought that they could do it without paying the price. In the end, the cost of their turning away from God and their acts of inhumanity was far greater than they could even imagine.

As people who belong to God we are called to take a longer and a larger view of life. What is it that God wants? What is it that God expects from us? What is it that is right by God's standards? These are all questions that we need to struggle with on our faith journeys. For we aren't really free to believe and to do anything that we want. We are a people who belong to God, and so God has challenged us to really love God and to love our neighbors as we love ourselves.

Amen.