

“Called to Care!”

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost

Matthew 21:33-46

It is an exciting time of year if you are a sports fan. Football season has started up. The Chargers are doing well so far! Basketball season and hockey season will begin soon. And even though the regular season is over, things are just starting to get really exciting for the baseball fan, especially if your favorite team is in the playoffs!

This morning I would like to use an analogy from the world of major league baseball in order to more effectively preach the Gospel reading, Jesus' parable of the tenants. I would like to compare and contrast the organization of a baseball team with the role of the master and the tenants in our parable.

In the world of baseball, an owner, whether he owns the San Diego Padres or the Boston Red Sox, puts together the cash to purchase a team. He or she owns that team. Since there are no salary caps in baseball, the owner can then decide how much money to spend on acquiring players. The owner can decide whether or not to build a new stadium that can seat more fans or keep the old one. The owner makes these kinds of decisions because he bought the team. They are his own.

Yet, in Major League Baseball, there are also general managers and field managers. The general manager (GM) of a team is hired by the owner. He typically controls player transactions and bears the responsibility of negotiating contracts with players. The general manager is also normally the person who hires and fires the coaching staff, including the field manager who acts as the head coach (Wikipedia, “General Manager (Baseball)”).

In order for a baseball team to run effectively, the general manager must understand his role in the organization. He is not the owner. He cannot officially operate the club. He cannot decide to sell the team. He cannot decide to move the team to another city. He cannot decide to build a new ball park. He simply acts on the authority that the owner gives him and manages the money that the owner allocates to him in order to put on the field the best ball club that he can.

The general manager is also not the field manager. He hires and fires the field manager. It is not his job to be with the team in the dugout from day to day, game to game. Neither is it expected that he even travel to every game with the team. It is not his role to decide which players play and which players do not play. That is the job of the field manager whom he hired.

Yes, for a baseball team (or other sports teams, for that matter) to operate successfully, each member of the organization must play their part effectively. Perhaps even most importantly, the General Manager must fill his role well. For, he is the middle man between the owner and the field manager and players. He is not the owner. He is a manager. Yet, he is not the field manager, he is the General manager. If he does not understand his role well and fill it responsibly, he could jeopardize the current state and future success of the team.

This distinction between a General Manager, an owner, and a field manager of a Major League Baseball team can be used as an analogy to help us better understand the basic problem that Jesus was

getting at in his Parable of the Tenants. In short, the tenants that the master allowed to care for his vineyard desired to see themselves more as owners rather than as the general managers they were called to be.

The owner of the vineyard in the parable shows great care for his vineyard by building a tower in his vineyard and leasing it to tenants who were to function as general managers of sorts. Many stone towers have been excavated within ancient cities in Palestine. Most of them had sleeping quarters in them. Many of them were located in vineyards. The owner of the vineyard then likely had a stone tower built so that its tenants could *keep watch* on the vineyard both day and night, especially during harvest time. They acted on behalf of the owner. He cared for the vineyard through him. They were the general caretakers of the owner's precious, prized vineyard. They would watch not only over the vineyard to keep it clear of robbers, but they could also keep an eye on the servants who would work in the fields to make sure they are filling their roles and working in the vineyard responsibly, according to the will of the owner. We might compare these servants to the field manager and the players of a baseball team.

In the parable Jesus makes it clear that these tenants are the *religious leaders of Israel*, the chief priests, the elders, and the Pharisees. They were the caretakers of God's vineyard, Israel. They are the ones to whom Jesus is speaking the parable. Like the owner of a baseball team hiring a General Manager to care for his precious, prized team, the fact that the owner of the vineyard leases to tenants to care for his vineyard for him shows that he is willing and able to trust others to do his caretaking and watching.

Yet, the tenants were not content being stewards and managers. We can see from their violent treatment of the servants, and even the very own son of the owner, that the general-manager-like tenants were staging a coup in an attempt to seize control of the vineyard for themselves. They caved to the insatiable craving for power and control, to be like the owner, to even be the owner themselves. And so they were willing to wreck their rapport with the owner, ruin their relationship with the servants, and altogether risk the destruction of the vineyard itself in pursuit of their self-centered agenda.

It is a little challenging for us as Christians today to see how this parable applies to us. It is very clear that this parable is speaking about God's story of salvation in human history. It is rather clear that the owner is God, the vineyard is the Church, and the tenants are the religious leaders of Israel in the Old Testament and during the time of Jesus. The servants are the prophets of old and John the Baptist, the forerunner of Jesus, who were sent by God to serve his Church and keep the Church in the truth of God's Word. And, of course, the son of the owner is Jesus himself. The description of the tenant's mistreatment of the son in the parable foreshadows the suffering and death of Jesus himself. This appears to be the natural meaning of the parable.

So where do we fit in the parable? How does this parable apply to us? Maybe at least through this one question: What are the ways that we seek control of God and his Church rather than to serve Him as owner and be servants and caretakers in his Church? Perhaps we show that we seek the job of owner when blatantly disregard his Will as an authority that guides not just our beliefs but also our actions. Perhaps we give the impression that we seek control of his Church when we push for our plans, ideas, and preferences at the expense of the health of the whole body of Christ.

But this is not the kind of vineyard that we have been called to live in. Our God has called us to live in his vineyard, the Church, as managers and stewards obedient to his Word and Will. It is all a gift.

Nothing we deserve. This gift of a position in his vineyard as a manager and servant has come at the great expense of the very life of the owner's son. What a price to pay for you and me. Sacrificed to make a place for you as a servant in the vineyard of your God, the Church. Raised to new life to give you a place unto eternity. Nothing we deserved. Nothing we have earned. All a gift from our gracious God, the owner who cares deeply for his Church, even for you. So, by the grace of God, let us repent of the times when we seek too great of control of that which, really is not our own but is a gift entrusted to us. Let us continually ask our Lord in prayer to help us by his Spirit to live our whole lives, in the Church and out, as grateful servants and generous caretakers. Amen.