

The First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
“People of God; Leasing not Buying”
Rev. Dr. John Judson
October 5, 2014

Genesis 28:10-22
Matthew 21:33-46

I had invited the children down front for the children’s sermon. As was usual they came walking, running or skipping to the front. A new little girl who was visiting for the first time was the first one up to the front and she took a seat on my knee. I wrapped an arm around her and welcomed her. By focusing on her I failed to notice the look on my daughter’s face. She was about four or so and my knee was her place. Suddenly I heard this voice that could have been used on the Exorcist, “My daddy!” Then my daughter grabbed the little girl by the arm and was going to yank her off of my knee. I quietly scooped up my daughter with both arms and placed her on my other knee. But if looks could kill, that little girl would not have made it out of the sanctuary alive.

Mine, it is one of the first words we learn. And as soon as we do we begin to mark out what is ours. My daddy. My mommy. My toys. My room. My side of the car seat. We might think that as we get older we let go of the mine syndrome. But we don’t. We simply use the words with things that are more expensive. My car. My spouse. My children. My house. My job. And this is not new and in fact forms the basis for our morning’s story within a Jesus’ story.

Our story finds Jesus still holding forth with the religious and Temple leaders in Jerusalem. Last week we looked at how he won round one, and today we find him going for round two. He does so by telling a story to which almost all of his listeners could relate. There was a landowner who did everything necessary for a successful wine business. He then leased his vineyard to some people who were going to run it for him. When the time was right he sent his servants to collect his lease payment. The people at the vineyard had however decided that the vineyard was theirs. They not only beat the servants but killed them and the son of the owner. Jesus then asks the assembled crowd what ought to happen. To a person they answer, “He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and leave the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at harvest time.” Had this been school they would have received an “A” and a gold star, for that was the right answer.

We can imagine that the Temple leaders were feeling pretty good because they had gotten the correct answer...that is until they realized that they were the murderous tenants in the story. And they realized it when Jesus made mention of the stone which the builders rejected. This is a direct reference to the Book of Daniel in which there is a new kingdom represented by a stone which destroys all of the kingdoms that have come before it, and this stone kingdom is the final one which will be established by God. In other words Jesus tells the religious leaders that they along with all of their predecessors have not given God, God’s due which was to create the kind of Kingdom community that God desired; a kingdom in which the poor, the widow, the orphan and the stranger are treated with respect. Instead they killed God’s servants, the prophets, in order that the religious leaders could create a kingdom in their own image; one in which power and privilege were worshipped. And now Jesus, the son, has come to initiate the one final stone kingdom; a kingdom which will be based on the love and grace of God through which all of the families of the earth will be blessed. In other words, unless the leaders change and give God God’s due by following Jesus and welcoming his new Kingdom, their kingdom will fall.

This concept, that we are to give God God's due by helping to create a new kingdom community which blesses not only ourselves, but all the families of the earth, is not new to us. We have looked at it in various sermons and articles, but what may be a bit disconcerting is the image Jesus used to describe how we are to be a part of that kingdom creating process; being lessees rather than owners. I say this may be a bit disconcerting because we are used to using the words my, mine and ours. This is my life. This is our home. This money is mine and no one else's. This is my time. And my guess is that sometimes we feel like Jimmy Stewart in the movie Shenandoah when he offers this prayer. *"Lord we cleared this land, we plowed it, sowed it and harvested it, we cooked the harvest and it wouldn't be here and we wouldn't be eating it if we hadn't done it all ourselves. We worked dog-bone hard for ever crumb and morsel. We thank you just the same anyway Lord for this food we are about to eat. Amen"* Yet in the end what we and his character forget is that we did not create the land, bring the rain, or create the seed. We forget that it is God who breathes life into us, claims us, forgives us and empowers us through the Spirit. It is God who has given us everything including the Son. And with all of that given to us, all that God asks is that we offer God back a willingness to work for a kingdom on earth as it is in heaven.

My challenge to you this week is to ask yourselves this question, "How does seeing myself as a lessee rather than an owner of my life change how I work to create God's kingdom here on earth?"