

First Mennonite Church Edmonton

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I have rented homes for my entire adult life thus far. And I have had good experiences, and mediocre experiences. I am fortunate enough to be able to say that I haven't had any bad experiences...yet. But my experiences of renting thus far have helped me see how the landlord/tenant relationship is a very particular kind of relationship.

The landlord tenant relationship is a tricky one, it's a relationship built on trust, as a landlord you are allowing someone to live and dwell in your space, in your property. As a tenant, you trust the landlord to take care of problems in a timely manor, and to be fair, just and equitable in disputes. There is a certain degree of faith that's required of both parties. Some of us are well acquainted with the dynamics that occur in the tenant landlord relationship, from one side or the other. And so maybe, for you, this parable sat a little closer to home than it did for others. When I saw a recent headline in CBC: "GTA landlords struggle to evict man from 11 luxury homes he's rented out as rooming houses" it made me think of this particular kind of relationship dynamic. And it made me think a bit about this week's parable.

This parable is a good example, much like the parable of the "Good Samaritan" as to why I dislike titles being given to portions of scripture. By titling this parable the "Parable of the Wicked Tenants" our focus shifts to the tenants in this story. The ones who kick out, beat, and abuse the servants the landlord sends before ultimately killing the landlord's son. But I'm not sure Jesus told the parable with the tenants in mind. I wonder, if this parable is more about the Landlord than it is about the tenants. I say this because of when, and where Jesus tells this story.

The context of Jesus' parables matter. The when and where he tells them, gives us a hint as to why Jesus is telling them. I've illustrated this earlier this summer by looking at the questions Jesus answers when he tells particular parables. For example, Jesus tells the parable of the "Good Samaritan" in response to the lawyer's question, "Who is my neighbour?" The Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus is tied to the Parable of the Dishonest Manager, and Jesus' Parable about the Great Banquet is so appropriately set at a banquet where he offers a number of lessons regarding hospitality and the Kingdom of God.

Regarding our parable for today, the when and where, like all the others, matters significantly. Jesus tells this parable shortly after entering Jerusalem. This parable is told near the end of Luke's gospel. In fact, it's told following the Palm Sunday parade, the triumphal entry. What

this tells me, is that this parable was part of Jesus' last teachings in that last week before his arrest and execution. We know that during that last week Jesus is in Jerusalem teaching each day, and was often found in the temple teaching. Because of this, his audience likely included not only his disciples and curious followers, but I would imagine that his audience would also include the priests, the scribes and the pharisees. So, because of where he was teaching, in the temple in Jerusalem, and when, just before his crucifixion, I wonder, if this is a parable more about the Landlord, than the tenants. I wonder if he's trying to tell us something about God.

This parable is told during Jesus' final days and what is interesting for me is that it is perhaps the most autobiographical of Jesus' parables. The layers of allegory are thinner in this parable than others. There is a landlord, who plants a vineyard, and rents it out, and then leaves for some time. It usually takes 3 years before one can get a good crop off of new grapevines, and so when the time is right, the landlord sends a servant, but the tenants beat him and send him away empty handed. So the landlord sends another servant, but this servant is also beaten and shamefully sent away. Not to be deterred the landlord sends one more servant, and this one is wounded, and set out. Note the escalation in how the servants are being treated. Each time, they're sent away more wounded than the last.

And so the landlord pauses and asks, "What shall I do?" And it's this question, this soliloquy around verse 13, that convinces me that his parable is about the landlord. The landlord ask themselves, "What shall I do?" Now, for some, it would be natural and not unexpected for the landlord to try and remove the tenants in anyway that they could imagine, litigation, violence, etc. The tenants are using squatters rights to stake claim to the landlord's vineyard. But the landlord comes up with another solution? "I will send my beloved son; it maybe that they will feel shame before him." In other words, I'll send my son to settle things, maybe the tenants will feel shame for how they've treated the servants. But no, the tenants, wanting the property, take the son out of the vineyard and murder him.

What follows is Jesus' revelation of him as the Landlords Son, and the scribes and the chief priests implicating themselves. But It's not the judgement that interests me is this little soliloquy from the Landlord that interests me. By rights, the Landlord could have evicted the tenants in any number of ways, but chose not to. And I think the significance of that for me is it begs the question, "What does this tell us about God?"

In the face of shame, in the face, of dishonour, in the face of servants being disrespected, in the face of tenants acting with impunity, the Landlord, God, chooses to respond differently. The Landlord, chooses vulnerability. The Landlord chooses to send their son, the heir to the

property. The Landlord chooses to offer not just another employee, but rather their beloved son. By sending the son the Landlord is saying, here is the most precious person to me, I am sending them to you to appeal to you. I can't begin to imagine the level of trust and faith needed to make such a choice. It's complete and total vulnerability. It is the same complete and total vulnerability that God, through Jesus, expressed. And in a way, it's what we're called to.

This, my friends, is a difficult parable, a difficult lesson. To be completely vulnerable, is not something we're encouraged to do. We're encouraged to save face, to protect ourselves, to save our skin if need be. We're told by our culture to reject guilt, avoid shame, to be strong. Grief, sadness, fear, all to be avoided at all costs. We are told that vulnerability is a sign of weakness. Except, none of that is true. Vulnerability, I think, is a strength. It takes courage to be vulnerable. It takes strength to surrender to circumstances. It takes a resilience to endure in the face of struggle. It takes a fortitude to be open and honest. It takes bravery to trust and to have faith. And to experience, rather than deny, grief, sadness and fear, takes bravery and makes us stronger for it. And this is what God did as Jesus. This parable, for me, is an illustration to the lengths that God is willing to go. God is willing to be completely, totally vulnerable in God's love for us. And that's the Good News here. It's also the challenge for us.

As followers of Jesus, choosing to live the Jesus way, I think an ongoing challenge for me, hopefully you too, is to embody the vulnerability that God and Jesus modelled. Because it's through vulnerability that community is strengthened, it's how we can carry one another, it's how we support one another, it's why our sharing time is both so meaningful and important. God's vulnerability invites me, invites us, to be vulnerable, and in turn, hopefully, our vulnerability invites us to be the vulnerable with one another. I say hopefully because I think it's something that all life long we're all learning to live into. But I think this is what this parable tells us about God. That yes, while God can be all powerful, that God does do amazing things, God is also willing to be vulnerable. God does have faith in us, God does trust us, with the vulnerable hope that we will reciprocate and have faith and trust in God too.

Amen