

"Bad Business"

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First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida

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Matthew 21:33-46 (NRSV)

"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. [34] When the harvest time had come, he sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his produce. [35] But the tenants seized his slaves and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. [36] Again he sent other slaves, more than the first; and they treated them in the same way. [37] Finally he sent his son to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.' [38] But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, 'This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance.' [39] So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him. [40] Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?" [41] 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."

[42] Jesus said to them, "Have you never read in the scriptures:

'The stone that the builders rejected

has become the cornerstone;

this was the Lord's doing,

and it is amazing in our eyes?"

[43] 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. [44] The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls."

[45] When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they realized that he was speaking about them. [46] They wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowds, because they regarded him as a prophet.

## BAD BUSINESS

Bad business, that's been the news this past week. People are worried. People are scared. Will my retirement fund continue to go south? Who's responsible for this mess? Isn't anyone watching out for the average person any more?

No one has any answers that make any sense. All we "know" is that some investment bankers made some house loans that they shouldn't have made and bundled them together into some kind of "toxic" stock product. I know this is hard to believe, but many major investment companies and banks bought into these stocks and now no one is willing to lend anyone money.

Both presidential candidates seem as befuddled about this as everyone else. All they know is that we need to buy up these "toxic" assets to save the economy. Estimates as to how much it will cost vary, but 700 billion seems to be a nice round number and why not make that bill a bit sweeter by adding another 150 billion of pork. Now that's bad business.

If you would have told me this was going to happen two years ago when I could have easily gotten a credit card for my dog, Snowball, I would have laughed. Now I want to cry. And like most Americans I'm angry too.

Somebody needs to pay for this. We need to hold somebody accountable, and we need to plug some loopholes. But, of course before we do that we need to invest 700 billion dollars in "toxic" mortgages.

How do we confront this problem? Where can we find an economist who can explain it to us? Don't hold your breath. They all have a different answer, and none are sure that anything will work.

## ECONOMICS AND THEOLOGY

I would once again suggest (as you might guess since this is a sermon) that this is not just an economic problem. It's a theological problem. Bad business is always the result of bad theology, faulty assumptions about God and the world.

We think that it's all about us and what we "need" right now. And out of greed we manipulate the "facts" to suit our own personal and political goals. Our ethics are often market driven. I think the folks at McDonalds captured it so well when they told us, "You deserve a break today."

But, the Bible questions that assumption. Do we deserve a break? Or, do we deserve something else?

Long ago some other politicians and religious leaders were facing a crisis that threatened their country. A man named Jesus was challenging their political and economic power.

He said that using religion to make money for the religious elite was a bad idea. He turned over the tables of the money lenders. He scattered the high priced sacrificial animals that they were selling in the temple courtyard. He even suggested that the temple itself could fall one day soon.

More than that, Jesus said that neither the Roman government nor the Jewish authorities were in charge. God was in charge.

The politicians hated it. Jesus was dangerous. They had to intervene before things got out of hand. The Romans would never tolerate someone who claimed to be a Messiah, and that was exactly what Jesus seemed to be claiming. In fact it seemed like he was claiming even more.

But, the people loved it. When Jesus entered Jerusalem the people acted like he was indeed the Messiah. They cried, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord."

And the religious leaders asked, “Who does this guy think he is? What gives him the authority to act like a king? He’s just a small time rabbi from Nazareth. And as we all know, ‘Nothing good ever comes out of Nazareth.’”

And so these movers and shakers asked Jesus directly, “Who gave you authority to do these things? Who gave you the authority to say these things? This is bad for business. Our economy and our politics depend upon playing nice with the powers that be.”

## THE STORY

And Jesus said, “Let me tell you a story. It’ll help me explain where I’m coming from.” The story he told is our lesson for today; we call it the parable of the tenants or as I like to name it, the parable of the hired hands.

At its heart this story is about a businessman who acts in a very odd way. He builds a state of the art vineyard. He spares no expense. And then he hires some people to run this place while he leaves the country.

What do you think happens next? It’s all very predictable if you anything about human nature. What do you think happens when investment banks are not regulated in the use of your money? They get greedy. They begin to think of that money as their own. And they make very questionable investments. Well something similar happens in this parable.

These hired hands begin to act like this state of the art winery was their own. Remember that this landowner was gone a long time. Months passed. (Some commentators suggest that maybe even years passed since it takes about five years to get a vineyard up and running.) But, one day at harvest time a servant of the man who actually owns this vineyard comes to collect his share of the profits.

And what do these hired hands do? They beat the guy up. And the amazing thing is that this continues. The landowner keeps sending servants, and the poor servants keep taking it on the chin. The Scripture tells us that they “beat one up, killed another and stoned a third.”

Not only is the landowner a poor businessman; he’s also a slow learner. Surely after the first altercation he knew it was time to call in the Sheriff or if necessary even take the law into his own hands.

But, once again the landowner does the unexpected. Instead of attacking or arresting these unfaithful stewards, he sends his own son to collect what is due. His logic for doing this goes like this, “Surely they will respect my son.”

This is child abuse. Who sends their son to negotiate with the Hell’s Angels motorcycle club? This is just not a smart thing to do. Hadn’t the father heard the old saying that the “leopard can’t change his spots?” These hired hands are a greedy and violent bunch.

It's almost like one of those horror movies when you know that the monster is on the other side of the door, and you want to shout to the pretty young girl, "Don't open that door."

But, of course she does. And the results are predictable.

And our absentee landlord carries out his hair brained plan to send his son to these crooks, and the results are equally predictable. These greedy crooks say, "This is an opportunity to make some easy money; let's kill this guy and get his inheritance." And they took the son outside and had him whacked. As the organized crime guys would say, "It wasn't personal. It was just business."

Greed always blurs a person's reasoning. These hired hands had no claim to the vineyard. It belonged to someone else. But, in their twisted minds this was an opportunity to make some many.

### THE "GOTCHA" ENDING

What a zany store this is huh? "You betcha"! But, now comes the fun part. This is when we in the audience get to give this story a satisfying ending. Jesus asks us as he asked those religious leaders long ago, "What should we do with those unscrupulous investment bankers who willfully stole our money and have threatened to wreck our economy? What say ye?"

What will happen when the owner of the vineyard finally comes back from vacation and discovers what these greedy tenants have done? And we all say, "Hopefully, the landowner will come to his senses and lower the boom on these guys. He will (as the Bible puts it) bring these 'wretches to a wretched end', and give the vineyard to some people who know that they are hired hands and not owners."

And that sound you hear is the sound of the trap snapping shut on us!

You see this story was a trick story. It wasn't a story about those investment bankers on Wall Street or some hired hands who didn't know their station in life.

This was a story about us; this was a story about you and me. We are the ones who act like we own the vineyard. We are the ones who think that we have authority.

But, guess again. According to the Bible it all belongs to someone else. This is our Father's world, and we are just caretakers. We are stewards of this world. We own nothing, and that changes everything.

Have you ever noticed that whenever we make a decision in the church we are always worried about what others will think?

What will the members think of this decision? What will our leaders think about this? What will Aunt Sally think of this? Will this be okay with the women?

But, how often do we really ask ourselves, “What does God think about this? How does this decision fit in with the plans of the one who actually runs this place?”

When Jeanie and Linda and I get together to select hymns for use on Sunday morning we often ask questions like, “Do the people know this hymn? Do they like to sing this hymn? Is this quality music?” But, how often do we ask, “What does this hymn have to say about God? Is this hymn pleasing to the one who actually runs this place?”

You know what I mean. We all do it. We often act like this is our vineyard, our church, our world. Our first and sometimes only question is “What do we want to do?” But, this parable suggests that our first question should be, “What does the Lord require of us? Whose church is it anyway?”

If we don’t answer that question right, we’ll get everything else wrong.

## JUDGMENT AND GRACE

This is indeed a parable of judgment. We are in danger of losing everything if we act like owners when we are merely stewards. But, perhaps in this parable of judgment there is also a word of grace. If this is our Father’s world, then we can trust God to take care of this world and take care of us.

All we have to do is work faithfully in the vineyard.

There is remarkable security in not owning anything.

I look back on those days when I lived in the house that was owned by the church. We Presbyterians called that house the manse. Most other denominations called it the parsonage, but you know us Presbyterians. We have to be different.

Living in the manse was an interesting experience. I remember one manse in particular was definitely a house built by a committee. It was a very strange design.

But, living in the manse was not such a bad thing. My congregations were always gracious and told me to do whatever I wanted to do to make the manse more livable and comfortable.

But, despite their gracious ways I always remembered that this was the church’s house. I was always reluctant to make too many personal changes. I was not the owner. I was living in someone else’s house.

Now I live in my own home. But, despite the pleasures of doing my own thing design wise home ownership has not brought me the satisfaction that I thought it would. I have more worries about taxes and the falling value of real estate. And I find myself longing for those days when I didn’t have a mortgage to worry about.

Perhaps I would do well to remember that the home I now occupy isn't mine any more than the manse was mine. And that's a good thing to remember not only about our homes but also about our whole life. Meaningful relationships, prized possessions, homes ... even our own lives are just on loan to us. We do not own anything.

This is our Father's world. He is the Landowner, and we are His servants. The minute we forget that important fact is the minute when we are in danger of rejecting the servants of grace that he sends to us. The minute we forget this important fact is the minute when we are even in danger of even rejecting his Son, Jesus.

Sometimes people and churches become so afraid of what might happen in the future that they grasp what they have today too tightly. And blessings can never come to those whose hands are tightly clenched.

We want to hang on to what we've got. But, friends what we've got is not ours to possess.

This week we've heard a lot of talk about the psychology of the market. If the traders on Wall Street think that something bad is going to happen it often becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. People who are usually bright and thoughtful often act in rash and angry ways.

Who can deliver us from this downward spiral? We need to remember that our hope is not in a bailout or buyout plan delivered by our government.

Our hope is to be found in remembering who we are and whose we are. Our hope is to be found in remembering the Lord of all creation and the gracious gifts that He gives us. The vineyard is not ours to possess. The vineyard is ours to work and enjoy.

I am reminded of how the Native Americans reacted to the European idea of someone owning a piece of land. They asked, "How can anyone own the land? It is like saying that we own the sky or the sea. It is impossible." I think they have a lot to teach us about our own faith.

## A RADICAL ENDING

So, now that we know that this parable is told against us (as well as against those religious leaders of old) how should we respond? Should we ignore what Jesus has to say? Should we be angry because Jesus tells us that what we want so bad to possess will be taken away from us? Should we be afraid and overwhelmed with guilt? How does this story end?

Let me suggest a radical ending to today's story. Suppose the landlord continued to send servants in an effort to bring about a peaceful conclusion to this dispute. Suppose (and I know this is crazy) but just suppose that the master of the vineyard can even forgive the killing of his own son.

Isn't that the strangest story you've ever heard?

Oh wait, I have heard that story before. It seems that long ago our heavenly father sent prophets to tell of his law and love. They told how God gave us an opportunity to care for this beautiful world. They told us that God's image was stamped on every human being. And all God wanted in return was for us to be a just and loving people.

But, by and large the people wouldn't listen to God's prophets. Some were stoned. Some were killed. All were rejected.

Finally, God sent his son, Jesus with his message of grace and love. What did they do with Jesus? Did they respect the fact that Jesus was the heavenly Father's son? No, they rejected him and they crucified him.

And the people who did it were the people in charge. They were the political and religious leaders. Maybe they were even people like you and me.

This was indeed a dark day for the world. Surely God would give up on us now. Surely God would destroy us for this terrible deed.

But, the story does not end as we expect. On the cross the Son cries out to the Father, "Father forgiven them. They don't know what they are doing." And the Father answers the prayer of his Son. He uses this terrible tragedy to bring grace, forgiveness and hope to a world that was spiraling out of control.

Even the wicked hired hands are given the opportunity for salvation.

God takes bad business and turns it around. God takes bad news and makes it into the best news possible. God takes what seems like foolishness and defeat, body broken and blood shed and in Christ Jesus turns it into a means of salvation.

## A KINGDOM BASED ON FORGIVENESS

Charles Colson tells a story about one of the revolutionary generals who was captured during the war in Nicaragua. He was tortured in the most horrible way possible, and his wife was also taken to jail and tortured. They did everything possible to take away any shred of dignity and humanity that he had left.

The war continued and eventually the Sandinistas were victorious. After their victory, they marched the National Guard leaders into prison. And in a dramatic gesture, on that same day they also marched all of the Sandinista prisoners out of jail in a triumphant procession.

As these two groups passed each other, one group marching to freedom and one group marching to jail the procession suddenly came to a halt. The Sandinista general, the one who had been so degraded and dehumanized in jail came face to face with the very man who was responsible for his torture. The general looked his tormentor in the eye and said, "Do you know me?"

The man was terrified. At first he denied knowing him, but the general would not relent. He said, "You are the one who ordered the torture of my wife." The Sandinista then grabbed the man by the collar and shouted, "Do you know what this revolution is all about?"

The former tormentor in an attempt to save himself he muttered something about how he agreed with the goals of the revolution and so forth.

But, the general was having none of it. He said, "No, you don't know what this revolution is about. This revolution is about a very different Nicaragua. I forgive you. That is what the revolution is all about."

Colson noted that though the Sandinista was a Marxist and not a Christian, in a way he knew more about Jesus than most Christians.

Today Jesus asks us, "Do you know what the kingdom of God is all about? It's not about making money or extracting vengeance. It's about grace and forgiveness."

No matter how often we hear it, we need to hear it again.

"This is my body broken for you. This is my blood shed for you. Do this in remembrance of me."  
Amen.

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN