

A young man pays off his final car payment—48 long months after the new car smell has long since dissipated. And he looks at the title document proudly and says to himself: Now, it mine. It's all mine.

A child's parent asks him to share his cookie with his younger brother, but the thought of sharing a portion of his sweet dessert makes him wrap his little fist tighter around the cookie: I don't want to share it, he protests. It's mine.

A football player is enshrined in the Hall of Fame. He rises to the podium to accept his award and says with a wry smile: This just shows what a kid can do if he will just work hard and give it all he's got. No one is going to give you anything. You have to grab life by the horns and earn your own way to the top.

Well what do these vignettes have in common? I would say: mistaken ownership. The young man who paid off his car overlooked that it was his Dad who co-signed the car loan and his parents who put money into his college bank account. The child forgot that only moments before his Mother asked him to share his precious cookie, it was she who gave the cookie to him in the first place. The football player forgot about all those unsung and unheralded linemen who blocked for him while he ran for touchdowns, all the coaches and trainers who taught him to play and wrapped his injuries throughout the years and the parents who played with him and drove him to football practice week after week, year after year.

It's mine, it's all mine! These are the words of people who have held a thing long enough to make the mistake of thinking possession is equivalent to ownership. But here is the real truth: we are not owners,

none of us. The real owner is God—always has been, always will be. We are all just caretakers, tenants, stewards for the real owner. Do we have work to do in this stewardship? Sure we do. But our hard work does not earn us ownership, it simply fulfills our role of service to the owner. We are not self-made. We are all created by God.

Today's parable is about reality, a reality that we would do well not to forget. Strictly speaking, it is not a parable but an allegory. A parable normally presents one lesson and the details are not relevant; while, in an allegory—and this I didn't know—each detail of the story has a symbolic meaning.

The message clearly is that God's people have been poor tenants in the Lord's vineyard. However, we read this, not to sit in judgement on certain people in the past. We must be careful to be aware of the relevance of this parable to our own situation. We are not reading it for historical reasons, but for reflection on our own lives and behavior.

Both the first reading and the gospel focus on the Lord's vineyard, that is, the place where God's people are to be found. At first, Jesus chose the Israelites to be his own people. He was with them on their wanderings to "a land flowing with milk and honey." "What could I have done for my vineyard that I have not done?" the Lord asks in the first reading.

But the response of the people, i.e., the tenants in the vineyard was far from the expectations of the master of the vineyard: "I expected my vineyard to yield grapes. Why did it yield sour grapes instead?"

In Jesus' story the owner sends his servants to collect the harvest. Instead, the tenants seized, beat, stoned and even killed the owner's messengers. This happened again and again. The message is clearly understood by Jesus' hearers. The Lord had sent his prophets to

remind his people of their duty to serve, to be a fruitful people. Yet, one by one, God's messengers were rejected.

Finally, the owner's own son was sent. "They will respect my son" the owner felt, but instead they killed the son as well. Now the tenants felt free to take over the vineyard for themselves. And afterwards, the tenants looked at the fields of grapes and exclaimed: They're all mine!

Well, today we are the tenants in the vineyard and we too can make the same mistakes. My life is not mine; I am baptized and I have a mission in life and God expects me to produce fruit, fruit that will last. The obvious question for me to ask myself today is: How am I doing? Am I doing any better than the chief priests, the elders, the scribes and the Pharisees? We are specially privileged by baptism to be called to work in the Lord's vineyard. Each week we are invited to gather together to hear the gospel message and to make it part of our own lives. We are called to be members, active members of the Body of Christ, the Christian community, the Church.

But, how do we see this call? Do we find it a privilege, a blessing or a troublesome burden? How well have I received the message of the Lord?

Over the centuries, how many prophets in our Christian communities have been rejected, abused and even killed? We think of Joan of Arc, Thomas More and, in our own times Bishop Oscar Romero, Martin Luther King, the countless victims of violence in Central and South American, in Africa and in the Northern Ireland.

All these folks have one thing in common. They were killed not by pagans, but by fellow-Christians, fellow tenants in the Lord's vineyard. We can hardly feel superior to the people Jesus is criticizing in today's gospel, as Isaiah's words in the first reading came true:

I expected justice but found bloodshed;

I expected integrity but found only a cry of distress.

And in so many parts of the world we do not have to look far in order to see the relevance of those words.

Even so, we may feel we have not personally been part of any of this. Yet, what kind of grapes do we as a parish community produce? Are they sweet and luscious; personally, I think that they are, but we who are so blessed in this bountiful area, we could do so much more. We need to repeatedly ask ourselves: is our parish a real sign of Jesus' presence and love in this part of our city? Furthermore, what kind of impact have I personally made by being a Catholic Christian?

Am I living out the words that Paul proposes to the Christians of Philippi in today's second reading, when he writes:

Fill your minds with everything that is true,

Everything that is noble,

Everything that is good and pure,

Everything that we love and honor,

And everything that can be thought virtuous or worthy of praise?

Paul continues: But if we can live them out, then the God of peace will be with us.

St. John the Baptist is a vineyard. We are not here to produce sour grapes that no one can eat. We are to be open to the various ways the Lord speaks to us, whether those people are Church leaders or prophetic voices which may sometimes say things which are painful for us to hear. There is always a temptation for a parish to become a security blanket for those who do not want to face up to the challenges

facing every society. But we must be careful to the never allow faith to be replaced by creed, worship replaced by discipline, love replaced by habit. After all when the crisis of today is ignored because of the splendor of the past, when faith becomes an heirloom rather than a living fountain, when religion speaks only in the name of authority rather than with the voice of compassion—then the message of Jesus Christ has become meaningless. And when that happens, people tend to cling to the old, fixed ways of doing things and resist change. Each parish can find itself producing its core of “chief priest and elders (who, by the way, may not be the clergy) who will make sure that prophetic voices (who may be the clergy) and people with real vision will effectively be blocked out.

It is just as easy for us in these times to fail to recognize the voice of God in the messengers he sends us, just as the Jewish authorities of Jesus’ time failed to recognize the Word of God in him. It was Cardinal Newman who said more than 100 years ago that “to live is to change; and to be perfect is to have changed often.” If we are not really making sure that our vineyard produces rich grapes, not only for us but for others to enjoy, then we are falling short as “tenants.” And it may well happen that the Lord may ask others to come and take our place in His vineyard.

I wonder: if St. John the Baptist church was closed down, sold off and turned into a dance hall: what real difference would it make to this area? Of course, we who come here regularly would miss it, but what of others who never step inside? Are we really concerned about that impact or do we think more of our own personal religious obligations and needs? Do we measure the quality of our parish by what goes on in this building or by what happens when we leave this building? Obviously, both are important, but there cannot be one without the other.