

Rev. Mike Cole
Providence Presbyterian Church
27th Sunday in Ordinary time
October 4, 2026
Philippians 3:4b-14; Matthew 21:33-46

"Not Getting What We Deserve"

"Imagine," said Jesus, "that a president of an oil company (let's call him, Mr. Humble) built a refinery of world class proportions. Further, let's imagine that when the plant was finished and ready to produce oil, Mr. Humble decided to take Mrs. Humble on a world cruise. He left the refinery in the hands of a plant manager and his management team. While Mr. Humble was in Paris, he sent his Administrative Assistant to collect his earnings. But the managers rebuffed all her efforts to examine the books and to determine her boss' profit.

Next, when Mr. Humble was in Rome, he sent his Vice-President to retrieve his rightful income, but the plant workers wouldn't even let him get in the gate. Finally, in Paris, Mr. Humble sent his son to the errant plant to collect what was due him, but both labor and management conspired to assassinate the son, which they did, thinking that if they killed the son, they would inherit the refinery and its profits.

"Now," said, Jesus, "what do you suppose the refinery owner will do to labor and management, when he returns to town?" The Pharisees decided that both labor and management would be tortured and executed because that's the way anyone would handle such rude, arrogant employees. That's the way anyone would handle it - anyone but God.

The problem was that the Pharisees may have been experts on people, but their knowledge of God was woefully lacking. Thank goodness that God doesn't behave with us like we behave with each other. The Pharisees were right in seeing that this was a parable of judgment - a judgment of all of us who treat this world, this country, this town and this church like it is ours.

We treat everything we have as if we deserve it. By rights, we deserve nothing. Our behavior doesn't merit even the smallest blessing, because we are not good stewards of God's property. We show disrespect for God and his servants whenever we try to claim what is His as ours. Even worse, we flaunt our rebelliousness when we are stingy with what God has given us.

Our lives, which “runneth over” with blessings by the cupful, are shared by the teaspoonful. God gives us life but we hoard it to ourselves and refuse to share it with others. We ask, “What’s in this for me?” Instead of “What’s in me for others?” We speak possessively about everything in our lives - it’s my time, my money, my house, my car, my business, my decision, my life, my, my, my, my.....

Well, I hate to be the one to break the news to you, but none of those things are ours - not a single one. They all - we all belong to God. We simply have a lifetime lease on everything. He has created us and asks in return only that we give Him His due. Yes, we are no better than those wicked tenants in the parable who thought they could claim as their own what rightfully belonged to the owner.

The tenants in the parable are leasing the land from the landowner – they are essentially sharecroppers. They are supposed to share the proceeds with the landowner. But they not only resist paying the landowner his due but they also violently rebel against the landowner.

Make no mistake about it, this is a parable of judgment on the tenants. The Chief Priests and Pharisees clearly see that they are the tenants whom Jesus describes. And yet rather than change their ways, they continue to plot against Jesus by working behind his back.

But, as with all of Jesus’ parables, this is also a parable of grace, because it issues a warning to those who treat God’s world as if they have an exclusive right to use it any way they choose. Through the parable, Jesus warns us not to take God’s blessings for granted - like we are entitled to them. When a mother says, “Look both ways before crossing the street,” she does so to spare her child from harm. When a father says, “Keep your eye on the ball,” he does so to help his child improve their skills.

Likewise, Jesus tells this parable to remind us who really owns everything we think is ours. It all belongs to God and should be used according not to what pleases us, but according to what pleases God. In the end, when we and even our church are judged it will be not on the basis of what we like or what seems good to us. We will be accountable for how faithfully we have followed God’s commands. So, the very fact that Jesus tells this parable to remind us to get our priorities straight is an act of grace.

But there is even more grace in the conclusion of this parable, which is an open-ended question: “When therefore the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?” The Pharisees’ answer is that God will “hammer them.” If the owner of the vineyard were anyone but God, that answer would probably be right. But when the owner of the vineyard is God, we must take into account that God has a different way of doing things, as He proved in the real-life fulfillment of this parable in the life of Jesus Christ.

God did everything that the owner of the vineyard did in dealing with those unfaithful tenants. He sent servants, one after another, to remind the tenants to give their landlord his due. But the tenants didn't like to be reminded that someone else was in control, so they ignored the words of the prophets. Then God sent His Son to the tenants and they liked his message even less, so they killed him.

But God wasn't done with these faithless tenants. He had one more thing in mind for them - He forgave them. He let Jesus take all their sins - all our sins - with him to the cross. He paid their debt - our debt. Now, who could ask for anything more grace-ful?

Several years ago, I read a touching story about a young boy whose older sister required emergency surgery. The girl had a rare blood type, and the doctors were concerned about not having enough plasma available during the surgery. The only readily available source was the girl's younger brother. The doctors and parents approached the issue carefully with the young boy, explaining that they must have some blood available in case his sister needed it during surgery. They explained the process of taking his blood, and asked if he would be willing to do that to help ensure his sister's life. He thought for a few minutes and then consented.

Surgery was scheduled for the following day. The boy was brought to the hospital with his parents so that he could donate the much-needed blood. Father and mother flanked the table as the boy was prepped and the needle inserted to start the flow of the life-giving fluid. The boy looked over to see the plastic bag slowly filling with his blood. He looked up to the faces of his parents who stood by him in awe of his courage. "Mom, Dad," the boy asked quietly, "How long will it be till I die?"

You see, he had misunderstood something in the previous day's instructions and had said, "yes" to his parent's request even with his false assumption that it meant giving up his own life to ensure his sister would live.

Jesus said, "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends." And a little child shall lead them.

Jesus left the question at the end of the parable unanswered because he wanted us to see the truth that God doesn't deal with us as we deserve. He deals with us as Jesus deserves. Why does He do it? Because we're worth it. Every one of us. The whole world, which belongs to Him is worth the effort, worth the pain, worth the rejection, worth the cost, worth the price.

In Jesus Christ, God reminds us that we're worth it - you and I are worth it! So, even though we may not feel worthy, within ourselves, to claim that salvation or take communion, that doesn't matter, because Jesus took all our unworthiness with him to the cross.

We don't come to communion because we are worthy, but because HE is worthy. We don't lay hold of God's salvation because we have earned it, but because HE gives it to us. World Communion Sunday is a reminder that God doesn't just save "us" and those who are just like us.

On World Communion Sunday, we remind ourselves that everyone – all cultures, nationalities, races and ethnic groups are welcome at Christ's table. God offers salvation to everyone because we are all worth it.

When we come to the table of our Lord, let us come as fellow tenants - those who have the privilege of using that which belongs to the Lord. When we come to the table of the Lord, let us come with rejoicing because we don't get what we deserve; we get far more than we deserve.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

The Charge: Wherever you go, God is sending you. Wherever you are, God will equip you. God will accomplish a purpose in your being there. Christ who dwells within you has something He wants to do through you where you are. Believe this and go in God's grace, love and power. Amen