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Lutheran Church of The Master
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Cycle A, Pentecost 21
Matthew 21:33-46

It certainly has not been a quiet week in Lake Wobegon, Garrison Keillor's fictional hometown on the edge of the Minnesota prairie. From Lake Wobegon to Washington D.C., from Wall Street to Main Street, we find ourselves in quite a mess. It appears that our economy is in the midst of a free fall. The question on everyone's mind is: who is going to bail us out of this one?

Jesus tells a story of another mess in our gospel lesson today – a different kind of mess, but one that suggests a bail out plan for times like this. A landowner plants a vineyard, puts a fence around it, digs a wine press in it, and builds a watchtower. Then he leases it to tenants and goes off to another country. Any Sunday School child knows that the owner in the story is God who gives the world everything it needs for every person to lead a good life – and the tenants are God's people, who have been placed in charge of God's vineyard in his absence.

Everything should be hunky dory in this vineyard, except there is a problem: the tenants don't want to be tenants. They want to run the place themselves and reap the benefits of the land for themselves. Greed is their creed; selfishness their song. And so, when harvest time comes, and the landowner sends a delegation to collect the rent, the greedy

tenants beat one of the slaves, kill one, and stone the other. It's a story as old as those proverbial hills. God gives us all we need, and we want more.

It's an old story, and a new one, too. Take a look at the headlines today. We are witnessing with our very eyes the verdict on our own country's greed. Housing markets collapsing, banks closing, markets falling, unemployment rising. The party is over. The rich have amassed greater wealth than at any time in history while our leaders looked the other way, while those in middle who do all of the work have been squeezed out and the ranks of the poor have swelled. It is greed that has gotten us here. God gives us all we need, and we want more.

As we read the story, we are surprised along the way, not with the greed (we understand that part), but with the very unconventional behavior of the landowner – not only unconventional, but shocking, even reckless. If you are like me, we are thinking to ourselves that this is the point in the story when the owner is going to call the cops and have these guys hauled off to prison. This is what they deserve. Instead of doing what we expect, the owner sends another delegation. At this point, we are holding our tongues. What a stupid man. He should know not to give those criminals another chance. When the same thing happens to these slaves, we are thinking, "I told you so."

Surely, now this owner has learned his lesson. He will do the right thing and do away with them. The law requires it. Justice demands it. Once again, instead of doing what is expected, the owner sends his own son. We are appalled that he would do something so utterly stupid – risk the life of his most valuable child - heir to the estate, provider in his

old age, the future of his family. Of course, we know what's going to happen. They kill him, too, so they can take possession of the land.

Isn't that what's going through our minds as we read this story? That's what the crowd thought. At the end of the story, Jesus says, "Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?" They all agree, "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." Yes, we think. Right on, man. Give it to them.

Isn't that what's going through our minds as we think about what is going on in our country right now? Wouldn't we like to see the perpetrators of massive economic injustice suffer - all those bankers, mortgage brokers, hedge fund managers who were so blinded by greed – all of those politicians who were supposed to be minding the bank, but instead were minding their campaign coffers - all of those rich who have amassed such wealth and power while the middle class crumbled. Wouldn't we like them all to get their due? Those tenants need to pay for what they've done.

And as we are thinking this, the door on the trap slams shut. It slams shut on those who listened to Jesus tell it for the first time. And it slams shut on us. This story is a trap to show how completely we fail to understand the nature of God. The world believes in God the Scorekeeper whose primary role is to enforce the rules, add and subtract our points, reward those who are good and punish those who are not. This is what has been ingrained in us. God's role is to make sure that everyone gets what they deserve.

This understanding of God, however, is in sharp contrast to the image we have in our story. The owner does everything he can to win over those wicked tenants. He gives them one chance after another. God has sent prophet after prophet to warn people of the consequences of their greed and exploitation of the poor - Isaiah, Jeremiah, Micah, Amos, John the Baptist – and the people did not listen. This God does not give them what they deserve. This is a patient, gracious, longsuffering God who wills nothing but good for all God's creatures and who will do everything possible to get them to change their ways. This is not God the Scorekeeper; it's God the Lover.

The one telling the story, of course, is Jesus, the son sent by God to save the world. He is on his way to Jerusalem. And we know what awaits him there. In Jerusalem what happened to the son in the story will happen to him. And again, he does what is not expected. He does not give them what they deserve. He forgives them and then he dies. There at the cross, God reveals what makes God's heart tick – pure grace. And there, we discover that grace is God's bailout plan.

It seems foolish that God would operate this way, yet we have come to see and believe that the only power that can truly change things is the power of grace – love that doesn't seek revenge but healing, love that forgives, even love that is willing to suffer. It is the only power that can stop the vicious cycle of greed and selfishness and save this world from destroying itself, because it's the only power that can change the human heart.

The trap that Jesus laid in the story reveals just how much people have missed the point. And it shows them one more thing. Notice that the people in that crowd, as they listen to Jesus' story, identify with the owner. Isn't that whom we identify with? We imagine what we would have felt had we been the owner - angry, hateful, hungry for revenge. Jesus is pretty clear. Those listening to his story, shaking their heads, are not the owner. They are the tenants.

What about today? Where were God's tenants, the church, while the wealthy plundered the riches of our land? Where were God's people, while this country experienced the greatest redistribution of wealth in our history – redistribution from the bottom up? Where was the church, while the workers in the middle saw their productivity rise and their wages fall? Where were the prophets - warning, exhorting, calling for repentance and renewal? Where were we, as we saw the rise of poverty, homelessness, neglect of mentally ill, abandonment of our elderly? Surely, many in the church addressed these issues with passion, acted boldly, and spoke out clearly. And many in the church sat by, and even somehow twisted the message of Christianity to justify this gluttonous orgy of greed – like those who espouse a gospel of prosperity where God is a cosmic Santa Claus and faith is a strategy to get rich.

But lest we fall into hopelessness and despair, the tenants in this story are the objects of God's mercy. They get not what they deserve. They get not what the law requires nor what justice demands. They get grace, nothing but grace. And so do we.

Just as our government looks for solutions to the economic crisis, we, as followers of Christ, look for solutions to the underlying crisis, the spiritual crisis that led to this mad feeding frenzy - the greed and selfishness of the human heart. No economic bailout is going to solve that one. No congressional oversight committee is going to fix that. It is the grace of God, the unconditional love of God revealed in Jesus that satisfies the cravings of the human heart. It is God's amazing grace that moves us from selfish self-concern to concern for the good of the neighbor, the welfare of the community.

Repentance, forgiveness, new life – this is God's plan for redeeming our hearts and for restoring the larger community. And this is what we have to offer to Lake Wobegon and this small corner of West LA - a plan that will get at the root of the problem – God's grace that feeds our hungry hearts.