

TWENTY-SEVENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME
Year A October 2, 2014

Theme: Priests and Elders of the People

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If you do a Google search for the words *“tenant farmer”* most everything posted is about those who farmed lands owned by others in the American South and Midwest during the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

For example, by 1890, the North Carolina Digital History reported, **one in three white farmers and three of four black farmers** were either tenants or sharecroppers.

In the Great Depression and Dust Bowl of the 1930, many tenant farmer families could no longer pay the landowners their share of the wheat or cotton crops and became the masses of “Okies” and others John Steinbeck so movingly wrote about in **The Grapes of Wrath**.

The tenant farmers in the parable of Matthew’s Gospel were to care for the owner’s vines and then at vintage time, as per their tenancy agreement, turn over to the owner’s agent his share of the harvest.

In Jesus’ story, however, the tenants repeatedly refused all the way to the point of killing the son and heir of the vineyard’s owner:

What goofy-headed, deluded thinking led them to believe they would inherit the vineyard if the son were eliminated.

“What will the owner of the vineyard do to those tenants when he comes?” Jesus asked his original hearers?

**They answered him,
“He will put those wretched men to a wretched death
and lease his vineyard to other tenants
who will give him the produce at the proper times.”**

Crucial to understanding the parable is noting that Jesus addressed it not to his disciples or the crowds but to **“the chief priests and the elders of the people.”**

These men, and of course they all would have been men at the time, were those who sat on the supreme Jewish Council, the Sanhedrin, the hereditary priests who led worship in the holy Temple in Jerusalem, also the revered lay elders, as well as the rabbis and the scribes learned in the laws and traditions of the faith.

They would have been the religious leaders of his time.

And the damning conclusion Jesus levels against them, at least in Matthew’s version of the parable:

“Therefore, I say to you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that will produce its fruit.”

We know this sort of talk became the immediate cause of the bitter animosity that ultimately brought about **Jesus’ death**.

We also know they became the source of **hateful and murderous anti-Semitism** that came to plague later Christianity and such do ruinous harm to our Jewish brothers and sisters over the centuries.

All this even though Jesus’ words were directed to the specific chief priests and elders of this own time only.

Given all this about the parable, **what do we do with it?**

Well, this week I’ve been thinking that while I’m not a chief priest, **I am a priest** and that many of **you are certainly elders** of the faith, and that we are all certainly tenants of the Kingdom of God.

Some significant changes have happened to God’s Church **during our tenancy**, or on our watch, if you will.

Many of our young, our **children and grandchildren**, as well as many of our contemporaries have left: some have gone elsewhere to have their spiritual needs met, many have given up religion entirely, and some have said nothing, just walked away.

I've spent nearly **forty years as a priest** and feel some real responsibility for what has happened during these years:

---where are our **teenagers and college students**?

---why is our church no longer important enough that **young families** make it a priority in their lives?

---How have I **failed** in my ministry? What have I, we, done wrong? Or not done? Where is the harvest for the vineyard owner?

Why is it that those of us who went through the World War II, and Korea and Vietnam have been unable to lessen the wars our country faces but instead has gotten us into a state of **perpetual war**?

My generation of the clergy was charged with **implementing the joyous vision of the Second Vatican Council**: instead the pews are emptying, the vitality and enthusiasm of that Council has waned and many of us clergy are now **beat down, tired and can't wait to retire** though there are precious few behind to take our places.

Likewise many of you "elders of the people" worked hard to share the faith with your children, send them to Catholic schools and religious education only to see some of them **turn away from the faith**, perhaps **divorce** once, maybe twice, not raise your grandchildren in the faith.

Many of us priests and many of you elders of the people have **spent our lives in the Lord's vineyard** struggling mightily to produce a rich and abundant harvest for the Lord.

Perhaps we should have or could have done some things differently, perhaps we can still make some changes, but surely the Master of the Harvest will reward what we have tried to do.

Pray much of what has happened in the church and world is beyond our control and when the vintage time comes, we will be able to **offer our owner a harvest worthy of the trust and confidence** God has placed in us.