

"The Lease Agreement"

Isaiah 5:1-7 & Matthew 21:33-46

October 2, 2005

The story goes that a very successful businessman - the CEO of a large and prosperous firm - pulled up to a gas pump one day {full service lane}. He and his wife were taking a little vacation trip. He left instructions for the attendant to fill the tank and check the oil and then told his wife that he was going to run in to the restroom. – When he returned, he was surprised to see his wife out of the car and visiting with the attendant as though they were old friends. As he approached, his wife gave the man a hug and got back into the car. After they had pulled away from the station, the man asked his wife for an explanation. She explained that the gas station attendant was an old friend from high school that she had not seen for years. "In fact," she went on, "we dated pretty seriously. I could have easily married him!" Her husband was a bit taken aback for a moment and the powerful CEO struggled with some insecurities before he finally responded with a bit of renewed self confidence. "Well, just think where you would be now if you would have married him instead of me!" Without missing a beat she fired back, "If I would have married him, he would be the CEO and you would be pumping gas!"

That seems to be a good spot to begin thinking about today's scriptures! Let me ask you this do you ever forget the importance of the role of your partners in this business of life? I think that it is easy to think that we have arrived where we are in life all by ourselves. But we don't. We are where we are not just because of our great accomplishment or our hard work - not because of our superior intelligence or even our ravishing good looks. All of these things are important in getting us where we want to be but we must not forget that we have a partner that has given us so much.

I suppose that the language of 'partner' is a bit deceptive or maybe even inappropriate. The scriptures paint the picture of a landowner. In both the first lesson and the Gospel we are reminded of the role of the landowner in the whole scheme of things. It is easy to read these scriptures and forget the owners contribution by the time we get into the difficult images latter in the text. Each text begins by telling us all that the land owner did. Planting the vineyard and the hedge around it - building a fence and a watchtower for protection - even providing a winepress for the produce to be processed. In the first lesson, it is also clear that the owner is the one who also tends and prunes, weeds and waters. Yet we so easily forget. - - - Isn't it lucky that we choose God to be our God so He can have such a wonderful people to relate to Do we forget that we have gotten where we are in life, not all on our own, but because of the gracious gifts of God as He loves and cares for us?

What an incredible gift it is that God has chosen us as the people to whom He would lease this portion of the vineyard that we call North Dakota. What an incredible gift to have a prosperous land, well watered and protected. What a gift

I do love the opening of these scriptures. And I wish the parables could have just stopped there. I do not love how they end nearly as well. I don't love to see that the vineyard in the OT lesson produces only wild grapes when God has done so much to insure that there will be good fruit. I do not like to see the tenants act so shamefully in the Gospel text when there is an attempt by the owner to collect His portion of the produce. We are not told how successful they had been. We might even want to find an excuse for their behavior. We love to make excuses - and maybe there was a good excuse - maybe it had been a bad year in the vineyard. Maybe these renters were like the young city couple who rented a farm property and decided to raise chickens. They began by purchasing 100 baby chicks. A week later they came back and bought 100 more. After another week they were back to buy another 100 and the salesman comment on how many chickens they were going to have. To which the 'would be' farmers said, "Well, we really aren't going to have so many. We haven't been having very good luck so far. Either we are planting them too close or too deep." — We do like to make excuses - but we know that there are no excuses. The owner leased out a great property to the tenants and provided them with so much. - - - Did you know that there was a lease agreement? In both scriptures it seems clear that there is.

As Jesus tells the parable, the terms of the lease agreement are not spelled out. It is only mentioned in passing. I suspect that there was a customary lease amount that would have been understood by the hearers of the parable - a general amount or percentage, just as there is today - so that even though it was not specified, the people would understand without any details. It is just common sense - it is just the right thing to do - it would be easier if the landowner just sent a bill or a copy of the lease agreement as a reminder every year - but He doesn't. He just asks us to be faithful.

It is not easy - we know that we need to respond to the grace of God - but we hate to talk about stewardship. I always struggle when it comes to talk of stewardship. I always try to be vague because I do not want to offend and I think that God's word often calls for vagueness in this area. We could talk about the details of our lease agreement with God in terms of dedicating our whole lives to God or a tithe of 10% of ones income. We could talk of responding in proportion to how you see that God has blessed you or based on justice for the needs of others - it can be difficult and often I choose to remain vague and simply call us to be faithful.

I like the story of a pastor who paid a visit to a farmer and asked, "If you had \$200, would you give \$100 to the Lord?" "Sure would," said the farmer. "If you had two cows, would you give one cow to the Lord?" "Yeah, I would." "If you had two pigs, would you give one of them to the Lord?" The farmer replied, "That's not fair. You know I have two pigs."

How can we be faithful to a God who has been generous in providing for us? The stewardship committee has been working on ways to help us be faithful. A program like "Simply Giving" seems like a wonderful aid to faithful stewardship. But ultimately it is up to us - when God blesses and gives us life - how will we respond when He comes looking for fruit from His fields?

AMEN