

Jesus's Take on What We "Own"

*a sermon delivered on October 4, 2026 by the Rev. Scott Dalgarno
based on Matthew 21:33-46*

Here's a true story told by an anonymous woman who lives in Hillsboro.

SOON AFTER MY HUSBAND, TONY, AND I moved into our new house, our next-door neighbor Edward began putting up a fence. We watched in disbelief as he erected it well on our side of the property line, claiming as part of his yard a group of trees under which we'd planned to put our picnic table and hammock.

I didn't want to say anything. Edward had seemed unfriendly when he and I had met at the mailboxes two days before, and I had a feeling a confrontation would be unpleasant. But Tony insisted we talk to him.

Edward watched us coming, his hands on his hips, a scowl on his face. My husband politely told him that we thought his fence was on our property. Edward spat and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

"Let's see you prove it, Mister Newcomer. You can't prove it, can you? You people come in here and think you can take over."

"Well, I guess I can't prove it. You're right about that," said my husband. "What do you say we get a surveyor out here to clear the matter up?" "You get a surveyor," Edward said. "I don't need anybody to tell me where my property is. You can go to hell." He threw his shovel down and stalked away.

I suggested we just let it go, but Tony said that would be wrong. He reminded me how we'd saved and sacrificed to buy this property, and if we caved in, who knew how else Edward might push us around?

We called a surveyor, who measured the property line. Sure enough, Edward's fence was four feet over it. Tony took the papers over to show our neighbor. When he returned, he said Edward had merely looked at the documents and said nothing.

The following day my daughter and I were out in the yard digging my new garden when Edward stormed out of his house and kicked a pot of flowers off his front porch. We tried not to watch as he began tearing down his fence, throwing the boards behind him. Tony went over and offered to help remove the fence and rebuild it, but Edward refused the help.

Our neighbor never forgave us, though we lived there seventeen years. We never put a picnic table under those trees. In fact, we treated them as if they were not even part of our property.

Property ownership is emotionally complicated, right? A noted social critic, has said the following: "Private property does not discriminate. It torments even those who own property. The vast majority of people cannot possess something they value without being possessed by it." (Mokokoma Mokhonoana)

Jesus' parable of the "wicked tenants" is all about this business of ownership. It's one thing to hear the story told from the point of view of the landowner -- but listen to it told from the point of view of the tenants.

Once upon a time there was a rich businessman who lived in Santa Barbara who bought a huge orchard in the Willamette Valley that had been in someone else's family since pioneer days.

The investor fixed the place up beautifully, spared no expense on the trees -- painted the sales shed - put up a big sign on the highway,

Then he leased the place to a local family for less than the market value with the understanding that they would simply give him 10% of the harvest of fruit every year.

The family that took it over was ecstatic -- they shook hands. The owner got back in his Range Rover and took off and no one in the Valley ever laid eyes on him again.

The family that took over had little business sense but set to work and worked hard -- They loved the place as if it were their own.

They used organic pesticides, they hauled water by hand from the creek in summers and in the fall they got the sludge pots going to protect from the frost. Many times they had to stay up all night, even bringing blankets from their own beds out to cover the little saplings.

By the second Sunday in October the fields smelled like fruit leather, with the trees heavy with yield and looking like Christmas trees. They worked in shifts to harvest the lot.

Finally all was in. The tenants were exhausted but satisfied when down the gravel road to their place came this sixteen-wheeler with California plates.

Two huge guys with big biceps got out of the truck and started loading it with the apples just put in the barn.

When one of the tenants went to see if they could negotiate this "10%" business downward, one of these loaders just picked him up and set him to one side.

In a few minutes all the tenants had organized themselves and with pitchforks descended on these two, telling them to "get lost," which they promptly did.

And you know, the tenants were wrong to do that. This wasn't their orchard --they had made a deal, and no matter how hard they worked or how scarce was the owner, he still deserved his share of the produce. They'd made a deal.

Now, this is sometimes a difficult story for Americans to hear who think of themselves as hard working and enterprising.

Maybe it's that the American dream has always been to own your own little bit of paradise, to own your own land and to grow your own fruit and vegetables on it and have a go at becoming rich.

I mean, look. We speak of “owning” our own homes, right? That’s the language we use. When in many cases, especially if we are young, we only own a little piece of our homes, maybe the bathrooms, and J.P Morgan Chase, holding the paper on it, owns the rest.

Anyway, if Jesus’ parable is to be read and understood on its own terms, owning stuff is not exactly in line with the values of God's reign on earth.

Ownership of the vineyard is not the issue. It is not for sale and never will be. The owner is not looking for buyers. The owner is looking for tenants who will care for the property and then give him a share of the produce at harvest time.

The issue here is not ownership but stewardship, which puts us a bit on the defensive, because it challenges our natural desire for outright ownership.

We have worked hard for what we have, whether it is 1000 acres or a double-wide manufactured home sitting on a lot the same size.

We have deeds and titles and fence lines, registered land plats and mortgage payment books and tax bills with our names on them.

What we have is due to a lot of work and a lot of risk on our part, right? Ah, but according to this parable we are simply deluding ourselves if we think we actually "own" anything.

Way back in the beginning, way before deeds and titles and such, our earliest ancestors understood this kind of story. The native peoples who managed the land we are sitting above right now understood that completely. No one owns the land. It is always managed; held in trust.

It is no more ours to own than our children are owned by us (which is interesting, because some parents have trouble getting their mind around that truth, too, but that’s a matter for another sermon).

Anyway, because the owner of the orchard never showed his face, it was easy for those who leased the land to forget him, and their original agreement. They'd fallen asleep; they needed to wake up.

When the owner sent messengers to remind the tenants of their agreement, of how it really was, all it took was a little burst of violence and the messengers who were left alive, ran away with nothing.

Now, the owner could have sent the police or hired thugs to enforce the thing, but he never chose to return violence for violence.

Instead he kept hoping that the tenants would come to their senses. He hoped they'd wake up, and that they would also grow up, and accept the agreement they'd made.

Finally when there was a whole row of unmarked graves, the owner sent his own son, unaccompanied and unarmed.

The son reminded them that ownership was just a delusion of theirs; that they were guests on this earth, not rulers, and that there was good news in that. That being guests relieved them of certain responsibilities they were not equipped to handle, like deciding who got to be rich and who got to be poor.

He reminded them that any relationships they struck up on earth were better when they **weren't** based on competition but were based instead on common gratitude to the same host who made the earth for all creatures in the first place.

All creatures – not just, you know, the 1% who own almost as much as the other 99%. You see, this is an important text for today.

In my sermon here last week I quoted the naturalist, John Muir, who once said, "Most people are on the world not in it. That is to say, most people have no conscious sympathy or relationship to anything about them -- [they are] rigidly alone like marbles of polished stone, touching but separate."

Jesus knew this. That's why he once said, "Behold the lilies." We are so intent on ownership we miss the beauty that is everywhere and free.

Jesus' parable reminds us that as guests we all have free access to so much more than any of us can have earned alone in a life time; think of Crater Lake National Park, Multnomah Falls, Canon Beach. The free bounty goes on and on.

But there are people who want to "own" and exploit those places, too. I remember going to a Presbytery meeting in St. George, Utah ten years ago.

The vistas there were lovely with wonderful bluffs and natural monuments like one can find in Monument Valley, Arizona. But I was completely shocked to see large ugly houses built right on the shelves of these monuments ruining the view of them for everyone including the home owners. Having come from Oregon, I couldn't believe it was allowed.

I mean, can you imagine a ring of houses on the rim of Crater Lake?

Well, people who make laws that allow that just don't understand Jesus's parable. I mean, they don't *want* to understand it.

Look, all the true owner in Jesus' parable asks is that we take care of this beautiful "orchard" we live in and give back a portion of what we have produced -- and not because he needed it -- after all, he turned right around and gave it away again.

No, he asks us to give it away because he knows **we** need to do just that, to remind ourselves that everything we have is held in trust. And, you know, knowing this in our bones is the only way we might ever learn to live peaceably together on this planet. Think of the tragedy of Israel and Gaza; think of Russia and Ukraine,

The owner says that we are welcome to live on the earth, and eat of it. We are to enjoy it fully, as long as we remember whose it is and how it is to be used.

We can even pass the lease down to our own children, making them our successors in the stewardship of the vineyard.

All we may NOT do is act violently toward those messengers (like Jesus) who come to wake us up to the fact that not a one of us truly owns anything.

To do that is to forget who we are, where we came from, how short life is, and where we are bound afterward.

We are here to manage this sublime place and in doing that properly, to take care of each other. We are to be as generous with each other as God is with us.

Remember how the owner of Patagonia Outfitters gave the company away to a non-profit to benefit the earth? The economics of God **can** happen.

Yes, and think of it the saints who planted this church here long ago. The founders who had a vision to bring a form of Christianity they were fond of to this neighborhood were thinking of you. Not you personally, maybe, but they knew you'd be here. Yes and they have handed it down to you to care for and be proud of, too. And you do.

Your new "transitional pastor" is on her way here. We call these folk transitional but we pastors know that we are, all of us, transitional. In any case a new era here is opening up, and who knows what it will bring?

We can only hope it can be managed well and then passed down to others in some form that pleases God.

Amen