As an emerging grown-up and millennial – no less – I have quite the disdain for leases. Rental leases, I mean. No one really prepares you for the finality of such grown-up documents. In fact, when I decided to accept this job and move to Texas, I found myself locked in to a rental lease in Arkansas and was just blessed to have a subletter help me out with this expense. I find leases restrictive and so very… binding. I can’t nail too many holes in the wall and if the oven gets tragically stuck on self-cleaning mode—well, somehow that becomes a crisis I am responsible for fixing before my landlord finds out. Okay, okay, the point is that when I sign that dotted line, I feel conflicted. The apartment is, well, not my own.

I wonder if God knew that humans would be such challenging tenants when deciding to enter into an eternal covenant—an eternal lease— with us. It was bumpy from the beginning. Even though the Israelites signed the dotted line of the law, they were not always the best tenants of God’s kingdom. And to be fair, at times God was quite a scary landlord. And to the Israelites’ credit, I doubt the original lease agreement implied that deadly plagues and locusts were the penalty for late rent. It was messy—this divine-human relationship, this co-creation of the kingdom of God.

But those vulnerable wilderness years were long gone, and the Israelites were no longer nervous new tenants of the Promised Land. They were prominent leaders now in Jerusalem. And when Jesus entered the Temple on this day, he met them in all the glory of their religious establishment. We often picture Jesus teaching in more rustic settings but in this parable, we find him in the formal house of the Lord.

Or was it the house of the Lord? It seems that the Lord Jesus himself did not feel at home.

You see, according to Matthew, Jesus often found more hypocrisy in the Temple than he found humility. And on this day Jesus decided to confront the
chief priests and elders, the religious experts, the ones who held the power with a clever parable.

He had probably given up on convincing these leaders of his God-given authority. They questioned it incessantly and were always trying to catch him in a mistake. But he would never, not until his dying breath, give up on trying to teach them about God’s kingdom and the role they played in it.

And what role was that, exactly?

The parable he tells is a troubling one. It is not easy to read. In such troubling times we face today, when the very real vineyards of Napa Valley are consumed by wildfire and the nation is rife with pain, I certainly wouldn’t mind a sweet and simple lesson about a mustard seed or the yeast of bread or even a mountain to move. We can’t even open our Bible to escape from violence and destruction. Instead we are faced with what tradition has called the story of the “wicked tenants.”

It is harvest time in the vineyard and a landowner wants to collect the produce from the tenants. The Temple officials lean in closer, listening to Jesus. In a disturbing sequence of events, Jesus describes the horrific violence done to each person who comes to collect the produce.

And then in a climactic moment, the hairs on our arms raise as we hear Jesus tell the final part of the parable. The landowner sends his son to the tenants, thinking “they will respect my son.” But they kill him too.

He was putting himself in the story, you see. The vineyard was a traditional metaphor for Israel, but on this day it took on new meaning.

But the lament remained the same: “God expected justice but found bloodshed.” (Isaiah 5.2)

Unlike other parables, this is an allegory—meaning that every character has a specific parallel to a real figure. God is the landowner. The servants who go to collect the produce represent the prophets who were mistreated over the ages. And the son... well, the son is the one standing before them. The Son of God. And who do the tenants represent? Who are these horrendous murderers?
“So what will the owner do to these wicked tenants?” Jesus asks. Ah, here he has them in the palm of his hand. The Temple leaders are about to be caught in a self-incriminating truth they were not prepared to confess. “Well, he will put those wretches to a miserable death, and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at harvest time!”

You see, the priests and elders were quite good at spotting evil from afar. Those wretches… not a wretch _like me_. It was much easier to spot evil from afar than it was to explore the shadows of evil within them.

And how could they be the tenants in the story, anyway? Many of the Temple leaders might have been wealthy enough to own large estates themselves and leased the land to poorer tenants. It was an outrageous image—these leaders of the Temple, the owners of the establishment, reminded of their own utter dependence on God.

We find ourselves working our own vineyard of sorts today as members of the Church. We are tenants of this spiritual land, this community of God’s people. And especially now in these long days of uncertainty, it can seem like our landowner has been gone too long and we have been left to our own devices. It is tempting to believe we are the ones in control of this whole enterprise.

In America, the urge to own things for ourselves and control them runs so deep. White Americans have a history of feeling entitled to land—even land that was already occupied. But the kingdom of God might be the only stretch of land that America can never own.

We can’t buy it or sell it, conquer it or control it. We can’t manage it or use it to earn a profit for ourselves. We can’t bargain for it or negotiate its value. We stand on borrowed land.

And the kingdom of God will always require more _of_ us than it will produce _for_ us.

But just because there is nothing to really gain, that doesn’t mean there is nothing to lose.

Jesus reminded the priests and elders that their actions had consequences. He tells them that the kingdom of God can be taken away from them and given to
those who actually produce the fruit of the kingdom.

It sounds like an eviction warning to me.

That is the thing about leases, you see. There is more accountability to a higher power. Jesus’ words remind us that there really is something at stake here—we as Christians, as religious leaders, us good “church folk” are not guaranteed to be star characters in the kingdom of God. It also reminds us that corruption and pride never go unnoticed by God.

We have to ask ourselves, what good fruit are we really producing? And are we trying to remain in control of it?

The power we hold to tend to God’s community is not a right but a privilege. And it is a huge responsibility that can be taken away. What would the Church look like if we remembered this gift could be taken away? In some ways, with the changes of church attendance and the growing skepticism of the Church, we feel the pressure just a little bit more.

Our efforts to run an institution smoothly do not always produce God’s good fruit. And so we remember what is really at stake. We return to God’s call.

This knowledge shouldn’t make us live in fear—rather, it should act as a compelling reminder of how precious the kingdom of God really is. God’s vineyard is the only place in the world where unconditional love has the final say—where there is no transaction to be made or deal to close or achievement to secure. It’s holy ground to grow in.

We can never lose God’s love, of course, but we certainly can lose the right to monopolize it.

That would entail letting go of who gets to join in the work with us. The Temple officials could have never imagined that prostitutes and tax collectors were farther along than they in the order of things. Their ego kept getting in the way.

I told you that I don’t like the restriction of rental leases, but I will say I know I am not ready for home ownership at this age. I’m not ready to be in charge.

There is freedom in being dependent on God. We can relax a bit and focus on getting to work. We can’t control the
harvest or hoard it for ourselves. All we can do is enter in, get our hands dirty, and then pass the work on to the generation working the next shift. We can choose life over death, humility over hypocrisy. We can become rooted in our purpose but not possessive of our power. We can hold all things lightly—with open hands—knowing that it is God our Creator who redeems all things... even the sins of wicked tenants.

Remember, the blood of the crucifixion somehow became the cup of salvation. And this cup of salvation will keep saving us from ourselves.

*So, do you own the place?*

No, just renting.

And that is just fine with us.

Amen.