

“Whose Party Is It?”
Matthew 21:33-46
Preached by Dr. Cahill
Babcock Presbyterian Church
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Back in the early 60’s there was a popular song with the title “It’s my party and I’ll cry if I want to.” I never really understood why any girl would want to cry at her own party until I watched a program on MTV called “My Sweet 16 Party.” It’s a series about 16 year old girls planning and executing the most important transitional event in their young lives, the venerated sweet sixteen birthday party. This young girl was taken to a swank store on Rodeo Drive to buy an expensive designer gown, then to a BMW showroom to pick out her new car; she interviewed caterers, and rock bands and chose the most glamorous venue for her party and finally made out the guest list, which was made up of the high and mighty popular kids in her high school.

On the night of the big party she was both deliriously excited and a nervous wreck because she was still in a micromanagement mode, wanting the night to be all about her. She even said, “I want to be the center of attention,” but her hopes were dashed when one of her girl friends showed up wearing an even more expensive and beautiful gown than her own. As the camera caught the tears running down her cheek, right then I understood. “It’s my party and I’ll cry if I want to.”

You don’t have to be a spoiled brat to be self-centered. It comes with the territory for being a human being. Of course it wasn’t supposed to be this way. God created Adam and Eve and placed them in the middle of the Garden of Eden, a perpetual sweet-sixteen party. They had free run of the place, Adam even got to name the animals.

But there was one restriction, “You may freely eat of every tree in the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat.” (Genesis 2:16-17) You know what happened, not happy with this one restriction they broke with God. They were too self-centered to enjoy the party God gave them. They had to micromanage everything. “It’s my party and I’ll cry if I want to.”

Have you ever noticed how much physical and emotional energy it takes to keep yourself at the center of the universe and make everything revolve around you? It takes work to manipulate people and orchestrate events, especially when people and circumstances refuse to roll over and cooperate. How much more happy and at peace would we all be if only we could learn this simple lesson: you and I are not at the center of the universe, that’s God’s job. Our job is to cooperate with God and then let everything else fall into place.

This is the main message in Jesus’ parable of the wicked tenants. Let’s briefly review. A rich land owner sends his servants to pick up the fees from the farmers who rented his land. This is important to know: the land owner is the tenant farmer’s landlord.

When the tenants saw the servants they conspired to make a statement by beating them up and sending back the message, “Don’t bother us, go away, this is our land now!”

I’m sure Jesus’ listeners were thinking, “What nerve! We’d never get away with that. If we refused to pay our rent, we’d be run off or put in jail or both!” You see, Jesus’ listeners were smart enough to realize those tenants didn’t have a leg to stand on, they were fools living in a dream world if they thought that just because they beat up the rich man’s servants they now could claim his land for themselves.

And when the land owner finally sent his own son and the tenants said, “Here comes the heir, kill him and the land is ours,” Jesus’ listeners must have been thinking, “These tenants are really self-delusional and self-centered if they thought they’d get away with murder!” But as Jesus completed the parable with the teaching,

“Have you never read in the scriptures:

“The stone that the builders rejected

Has become the corner stone;

This was the Lord’s doing

And it is amazing in our eyes.”

(Matthew 21:42)

It was then Jesus’ listeners got the point, whenever you step back and take a long, hard look at yourself, you can see that you’re as self-centered and self-delusional as those foolish, wicked tenants, and when that reality hits you’ll no longer dare sing “It’s my party and I’ll cry if I want to.”

From the beginning, in Genesis until the last chapters of Revelation there’s this recurring theme of rebellion and disobedience. Even though God throws us a wonderful party, we want to take over and make ourselves the center of attention, and then when God sends us his own son to bring us back to reality, we effectively crucify him, because after all “it’s my party.”

The Bible teaches “Fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.” Being in awe, overwhelmed by God’s powerful love and grace that you find yourself on your knees and bowed down is the best cure for self-centeredness and the beginning of wisdom, realizing, surprise, surprise, it’s really not your party, it’s God’s party, and because God loves you you’re still invited and what’s more, we are gently reminded that Jesus alone should be at the center of the universe if only because Jesus isn’t self-centered, but self-giving.

In his letter to the Philippians Paul writes a passage urging us to imitate Christ’s humility.

“Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,

Who though he was in the form of God,

Did not regard equality with God

As something to be exploited

but emptied himself

taking the form of a slave...
and became obedient to the point of
death
even death on a cross.”

(Philippians 2:5-8)

When you place this plea for humility and righteousness along side Jesus' parable of the wicked tenants, we're reminded of the times we tried to grab control from God, instead of being faithful tenants who realize all our blessings are on loan to us. Everything you own, yourself included, ultimately belongs to God.

There was a church next door to a supermarket. Since the market was always closed on Sunday mornings the church asked the store owner permission to park in his parking lot. "Sure," he said, "You can park for free 51 weeks a year." What about the other week?" "That week I'll chain off the lot to remind you the lot belongs to me."

We need to be reminded that we belong to God, and that life is really God's party, not ours. This is not our church, it's God's. Your life isn't yours, it's God's. Even so, God gives us privileges and responsibilities enabling us to enjoy and appreciate what we have and equally important, not covet what we don't have. I'd like us to end with an old but timeless prayer taken from John Baillie's classic devotional *A Diary of Private Prayer*. The language may be archaic, but it remains powerful. Please pray with me.

O merciful Father, who looks down upon the weaknesses of Thy human children more in pity than in anger, and more in love than in pity, let me now in thy holy presence inquire into the secrets of my heart.

Have I today done anything to fulfill the purpose for which Thou didst cause me to be born?

Have I accepted such opportunities of service as Thou in Thy wisdom has set before my feet?

Have I performed without omission the plain duties of the day?

Give me grace to answer honestly, O God.

Have I today done anything to tarnish my Christian ideal of manhood?

Have I been lazy in body or languid in spirit?

Have I wrongfully indulged my bodily appetites?

Have I kept my imagination pure and healthy?

Have I been scrupulously honorable in all my business dealings?

Have I been transparently sincere in all I have professed to be, to feel, or to do?

Give me grace to answer honestly, O God.

O thou whose infinite love, made manifest in Jesus Christ, alone has power to destroy the empire of evil in my soul, grant that with each day that passes I may more and more be delivered from my besetting sins. Amen.