

Squatting at the Lord's Table
Matthew 21:33-46
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There are squatters on Wall Street. Maybe you have heard about the protests currently taking place in New York City, called “Occupy Wall Street,” in which a diverse coalition of angry citizens are camping out in Manhattan demanding “democracy, not corporatocracy,” trying to bring pressure on Wall Street institutions and change the undue influence corporations have on the political process. The call has gone out for twenty thousand people to occupy the streets and plazas around Wall Street until the government takes notice and does more for the average citizen than the average corporation. Yes, there are squatters on Wall Street, but they are not the protestors. More on them later.

A squatter is, of course, someone who takes possession of land of which he or she is not the owner. This often happens in the absence of the owner or a caretaker, when land is left vacant or underutilized. People in need move onto the land and try to carve out an existence, building as they can. Some countries have more tolerance for squatters than others, Costa Rica being quite generous towards squatters who can manage to stay put long enough to lay claim to the property. The landowner generally resists squatters and tries to dislodge them, considering personal property rights to be inalienable. Squatting is certainly not a new concept. In fact, squatters make an appearance in tonight's Gospel reading, in which unruly

tenants make life difficult for the owner of a vineyard. You may have wondered what kind of drugs the tenants were on when, after seeing the landowner son approaching to collect the rent, they thought to themselves, “This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance.” In fact, even though they sound kind of delusional, as if they somehow are going to take the son’s place, they were thinking pretty clearly. You see, with the son, the rightful inheritor, out of the way, and the owner an absentee, if they just stayed there until he died, the land would become theirs, because no one would be able to claim it. So, even though the landowner placed them there in the first place, they become de facto squatters hoping to gain by violence and deceit what was not theirs to begin with.

Jesus is telling a parable of course, one aimed directly at those who were listening to him, people we learn are the chief priests and Pharisees, the leaders of the Judaism of the time. The allegory is pretty clear: God is the owner of the vineyard who expects those placed in charge of the land to produce good fruit, a harvest we can label righteousness and justice for all. These tenants, wanting to keep all the goodies for themselves, decide not to share with God, and everyone else, the harvest, and so reject all who are sent to them with God’s demand. The slaves, sent and killed, are the prophets; the Son, sent and killed, is, of course, Jesus; and the tenants/squatters are the chief priests and Pharisees who are in for a big surprise if they think God is going to let them get away with this lack of gratitude and this abundance of violence. The Kingdom of God, God’s vision of

shalom, has become the private property of those in power, or so they thought, until the day of reckoning comes, and it is given to those who are truly able to live into the fullness of God's vision. These would be Jesus' followers who have caught that vision.

So, back to the occupation of Wall Street. In this public parable, the bankers are the tenants who have betrayed the public trust, and have tried to keep "all the produce" for themselves. Admittedly, it is not a perfect metaphor; we do not usually associate multimillionaire corporate owners with tenant farmers, but stay with me for a moment, because you always need to follow the money. You see, the money they play with, that they are trying to keep, is not really their own, but belongs to the common good, a fine metaphor for the ownership of the vineyard. Corporate entities have become squatters on public land, so to speak, hoping to gain its inheritance by outlasting all sent to them with demands to play fair. Perhaps you have seen the quote circulating around the Internet this last week by Massachusetts candidate for the US Senate, Elizabeth Warren, a quote which might shed light on this modern day parable. This is what she said: "There is nobody in this country who got rich on his own. Nobody. You built a factory out there — good for you! But I want to be clear. You moved your goods to market on the roads the rest of us paid for. You hired workers the rest of us paid to educate. You were safe in your factory because of police forces and fire forces that the rest of us paid for. You didn't have to worry that marauding bands would come and seize

everything at your factory, and hire someone to protect against this, because of the work the rest of us did. Now look, you built a factory and it turned into something terrific, or a great idea — God bless. Keep a big hunk of it. But part of the underlying social contract is you take a hunk of that and pay forward for the next kid who comes along.” This is the line of thinking resonating with those who are occupying Wall Street.

What Elizabeth Warren describes as “the underlying social contract” has a long and interesting philosophical history partly formed by the Bible itself and the kind of community to which God calls us. The Ten Commandments are a social contract. Jesus’ double love commandment, to love God and love neighbor, is a social contract. God calls us to be responsible for one another, and see to the welfare of the widow, the orphan, and the foreigner. We are called to lay down our lives for our friends, to seek to be the servant of all. For our purposes this evening, it is probably most helpful to consider the whole of creation itself as the stuff of a social contract, since it was given to us and for us by God, with the idea that we would be stewards of it, caretakers of it. Elizabeth Warren’s main point is true, that all citizens, or at least most citizens, contribute to the infrastructure that makes wealth possible, and you have to be almost willfully blind to not see that. A Christian must be equally blind not to see that in the end, it all goes back to what God has given us, the natural resources of this planet earth which are exploited for both positive and negative ends. That is to say that the vineyard of which Matthew

speaks can be seen not only as the Kingdom of God in a spiritual sense, but also tangibly as creation itself, a resource given for all, and not merely a few to hoard for themselves.

If we continue then with the modern day metaphor of Manhattan as vineyard, the tenants are those corporations and their leaders who have received the responsibility for the care of the planet and all its systems. Those protestors occupying Wall Street are then the servants sent by the landowner, demanding the common good being withheld from them, and God only knows who the Son is in this drama, but like I said, no metaphor is perfect. The point is that while the protestors may be camped out on someone else's land in what they call Liberty Square, we are as delusional as the Pharisees if we see the protesters as the squatters, rather than those who are violating the social contract, and leaving the widow, the orphan and the foreigner to fend for themselves. It is, in the end, delusion that Jesus is addressing with the parable, the delusion of the Jewish leaders of the time that they were truly caring for those under their charge. Jesus is always clear that delusion kills, the delusion that we are not sinners, that we make our own destiny, that our responsibility is limited to those we know and love. Most of all, we are delusional if we do not recognize the source of all we have been given, and use that responsibly and justly and gratefully.

Perhaps nowhere is it more important to put aside our delusion than at the Lord's Table, and no occasion of the Sacrament more so than on World

Communion Sunday. World Communion Sunday gives us our clearest opportunity to see what the Sacrament is all about, and to put aside any false notion of its significance. You see, there is nothing less at stake in the Sacrament than the salvation of the whole world, not just our own kind, or our own selves. Jesus did not offer his body and blood just for you and me, but for everyone, for all creation. And in his asking us to remember him when we eat and drink this meal, he asked us to uphold that social contract with all for whom he died. You see, if we are not careful, we will find ourselves squatting at the Lord's Table, thinking that it is our table, not God's table. If we are not careful, we will find ourselves believing that there is only one kind of bread that can be used, or only one way in which the elements can be distributed, or only one class of people worthy to take it. If we are not careful, we will forget that this bread and this cup are part of a larger conversation on famine, and food security, and economic development, and genetically modified foods, all of them issues at stake in the stewardship of the world, the vineyard that has been entrusted into our care. If we are not careful, we will turn the Sacrament into nothing more than a McDonald's Happy Meal, and then we will be well on our way to being replaced by other tenants who will give God the produce at the harvest time. This World Communion Sunday, may we find our commitment to God and to all of God's people renewed. Amen.