

TO WHOM DOES IT BELONG?

Luke 20:9-20

Fighting has resumed in the Gaza strip. For all the news it makes it is just an area that would cover Story and Boone counties. But it has been fought over because of conflicting claims about who should own the land of Palestine. Jewish immigrants first came from Europe in the late 1800's hoping to settle in the land that was given to their ancestors through Abraham's son Isaac from God. But the people already there also had a claim that many believed came from God through Abraham's son Ishmael. So, to whom does the land belong?

That issue has come up in the United States when considering how European immigrants took land from the Native Americans. So, there is talk about returning land to the original owners. But who are they? We can say "Native Americans," but which ones? There were hundreds of tribes before Europeans came. The Oscar winning movie "Dances with Wolves" highlighted the Sioux nation. But the Sioux were actually only buffalo hunters on horseback. Up until the late 1700's they lived with their sister Chippewa tribes in the woods of Minnesota. Only when horses got on to the Great Plains that got away from Europeans did they move on the prairies and make their living off buffalo. They did that by overcoming other tribes that lived there before them. The Commanche controlled the southern plains by pillaging other tribes and later the Mexicans. Famous tribes like the Apache and Navajo are known as "Athabascan" because they share the same language group as the Inuit and came to North America well after other tribes. So which tribes should get what land? To whom does it belong?

That is an important question for us, because we have so many things. And it is to our advantage, especially financially, with things like houses and cars, to own and not lease and rent them. To whom does it belong? So much of our lives revolves around making sure it is mine!

That was the issue that Jesus brings up in the story He tells of the wicked tenants. A man who owns a vineyard leaves it in the care of tenants and goes a long way away. After a while he sends a servant to collect some of the profits from the harvest. But they beat him up and sent him away. This happens a second time. The man decides to send his son, believing they would not harm him. But the tenants plot together and kill the son, thinking they will get the vineyard for themselves.

It may seem ridiculous to us that by killing the son they could claim it as their own. But we have to see this in light of absentee owners in the Roman Empire. As the empire grew, it became important to maintain. The Roman proved they could beat anyone in battle, but wars are expensive, and it is better to keep peace by politics. One of the ways Rome did this is by giving ownership of lands to rulers who were loyal to the empire. At first this was not an issue

because the places granted to them were nearby. But as the empire gave out more and more of these grants, often they gave ownership to people who lived far away from the land. Without modern communication and transportation you could easily lose control of the land assigned to you. If you were absent enough from it, the local people who cared for it could claim ownership.

Jesus' story is directed to the enemies who opposed Him. To set the background for it, He had already told the story in Luke of the ruler who left his estate in the hands of servants. He notes how when the man was away, a delegation sought to take away his power. This story was not told in thin air. Jesus' enemies knew He was referring to how the land of Israel had been given by the Roman emperor Caesar Augustus to Herod the Great. When Herod died, when Jesus was just a boy, the land was divided among his sons. One of them, Archelaus, was deposed by Caesar when a delegation of people from the area of Judea around Jerusalem appealed to him. Archelaus was replaced by a Roman governor, one of which was Pontius Pilate. So, they know Jesus is claiming to be from God, and they are trying to stop Him.

On top of that Jesus' enemies had come to Him with what they thought was the perfect question, the one that would get Him to make a gaffe and discredit Him. They asked Him, "But what authority do you do what you do?" They were hoping that He would outright say He was getting it from God so they could accuse Him of false teaching. Instead, He asked them, "By what authority did John the Baptist do what he did, by God or men?" We might think Jesus was doing a classic example of evading a question, but among the Jewish rabbis the best answer to a question was what they called a "higher question." It was like raising the stakes in poker. They knew that if they said John did it from God, then Jesus would ask why they didn't follow him. If they said he was from men, then the people, who had believed John, would get mad. They didn't answer, and left frustrated.

Jesus' answer shows that He was really from God. His enemies clearly recognize that the owner of the vineyard is God, his servants were the prophets, and the son is Jesus. They are acting like God is an absentee owner whose property they can claim as their own. They have turned away from God's commands to follow their own. They are living as if it belonged to them, not God.

That is our problem as well. We act as if what we have is ours, like a child insisting, "It is my toy!" think of how families can fight over inheritance. "It is mine because I worked for it. I deserve this." We see how we consider what is right and wrong. If something favors "me," then it is right and just. It is the way it is supposed to be. And where that really can affect us in seeing that our position in life, our relationship with God is something we worked for, something we deserve.

We know what happened to those who insisted things were their way, not Jesus'. As Jesus promised they lost it all in 70 AD when the Romans crushed the Jewish rebellion and razed Jerusalem and the temple. It will be our world when it comes to an end. All that we try to build up and claim as our own, will be destroyed. It won't belong to any of us.

But "the stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone." Jesus came to show us that it really all belongs to God—and that includes us. He came to be rejected by the selfishness that insists that it is "mine," so that we can live knowing it is all God's—and rejoicing in that because we belong to a God who loves us so much. St. Paul says about this in Ephesians 2:

Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of His household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus Himself as the chief cornerstone. In Him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in Him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by His Spirit.

In that "building" there is no fight over what belongs to whom. It is all God's who lovingly shares all with us as He has in giving us His Son.

The story is told about the difference between heaven and hell. In hell the people are sitting by a banquet hall filled with food, but are starving because their utensils are too long for them to put in their mouths. We see the same view of heaven, but the people are joyfully feasting because they use their utensils to feed the person on the opposite side of the table. That is what happens when we realize it is all God's.

"To Whom does it belong?" To our mighty and most loving Savior!