

Sermon: Parable of the Wicked Tenants

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles, Ottawa, Oct 4, 2026)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

The Doctrine of Discovery is a 15th century legal and religious concept employed by European empires (mostly Christians) to justify their colonial conquest, displacement and subjugation of Indigenous peoples and their lands. The doctrine stemmed from a series of decrees issued by various Catholic Popes—called Papal Bulls—giving Christian monarchs and explorers the religious authority to claim non-Christian lands. It advanced a false legal principle of *terra nullius*, the Latin phrase for ‘nobody’s land’, which treated lands inhabited by non-Christians as open to be seized, conveniently ignoring millions of Indigenous people who were still living on those lands.

Such framework presumed that European culture, religion, and peoples were superior to all others. It really is a sinful idea that colonial powers, European or otherwise, had the right to appropriate lands, and treat non-Christians as undeserving of rights attached to those lands. It should also be noted that most of the North America, including the now United States and Canada, were ‘discovered’ under such a doctrine. Such a doctrine and its associated concepts had governed the Crown to Indigenous relationship, given rise to the Indian Act, and profoundly shaped the system of residential and day schools in which our denomination, the Presbyterian Church in Canada, was complicit.

Responding to the Call to Action 46 of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the PCC repudiated the Doctrine of Discovery at its General Assembly in 2019. In 2023, the Catholic Church followed suit. Statements issued by the Vatican explained that the doctrine was never part of official Catholic teaching and acknowledged the suffering caused to Indigenous communities. However, those statements stopped short of formally rescinding the original papal bulls, leaving questions open about underlying legal land titles—who actually own the land under which people in North America have built their lives ever since Christopher Columbus first ‘discovered’ it in 1492.

In our Scripture reading this morning, we find a similar dispute, uncertainty and confusion over land ownership, in the Parable of the Wicked Tenants, as told by Jesus in Matthew 21, “*There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a winepress in it, and built a watchtower. Then he leased it to tenants and went away.*” (v.33)

Another vineyard? What is this? This must be the third parable Jesus told in the Gospel of Matthew concerning vineyard. The opening description of this vineyard corresponds almost word-by-word to the one in Isaiah 5, which is our Old Testament reading today. That vineyard was referring to the House of Israel. The problem there was that of not bearing fruits. More precisely, when the land owners returns to find vines with rotten grapes, he vows to remove its hedge, to break down its wall, to make it a wasteland where no rain will fall. The harsh tone of judgement is undeniable. However, here in Matthew 21, the problem of this vineyard is that of ownership.

Ownership is seemingly the fundamental building block of our modern economy. Many in North America are encouraged to own. We study in order to work, work in order to buy, buy in order to own. Even when we are renting, we strive one day to own, so much so we invent the scheme of ‘renting to own’. Taking ownership of one’s life is a sign of growing into adulthood, a sign of maturity.

When I started this vocation of ordained ministry some 20 years ago, many Presbyterian congregations still had manses for ministers. I had stayed in one for 12 years. Now most had done away with such, electing to pay ministers housing allowances designed to encourage them to own. Ownership to a property means stability, it hedges against inflation, it’s good for both the congregation and the minister.

But there is a downside to ownership, that is we begin to think that we are masters of our own domain—my time is my own; my work is my own; my family is my own; my church is my own; and my life is my own. We forget that, truly, the master of everything we own or hope to own is none other than the One True God, the Creator and true owner of everything we see or imagine. We are merely stewards, entrusted to manage what we think we own.

Coming back to the parable, to the bad tenants in the story. Forgetting they are not owners, they mistreated even killed the servants sent by the owner to collect rent—namely produce of the vineyard. These bad tenants behaved as if they were the owners, but the true owner of the

vineyard was patient, even gracious, not easily angered nor provoked. “Then he sent his son to them, thinking ‘They will respect my son.’ But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, ‘this is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance.’ So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him.” (v.37-39)

There is a serious flaw in their logic of not ‘renting to own’ but ‘killing to own’. But before we go down the path of criticizing these bad tenants, I submit to you to first reflect on how different are we? How different are we when we think we can neglect to worship, refuse to fellowship, unwilling to serve? We expect the church to meet our needs or desires, and when that doesn’t happen right away, we change church. We go look for another that fits our particular style and taste. How fruitful are we truly? Aren’t we also acting just like those bad tenants? How would you respond to the question posed by Jesus: “*Therefore, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?*” (v.40)

The chief priests and Pharisees thus invited their own judgement by responding as such: “*He will put those wretches to a miserable death and leave the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the harvest time.*” (v.41) It is worth noting such a judgement was pronounced but not executed. God did not ‘put those wretches to a miserable death’. We know this by the one-liner that Jesus customarily put out, and in the case of this Parable of the Wicked Tenants, Jesus concludes, citing Psalm 118:22-23, “*The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord’s doing, and it is amazing in our eyes.*”

Indeed, the cornerstone being Christ, was freely given by God the owner, the Father in heaven, so that all may repent and be saved through faith, and that is amazing in our eyes. That indeed is good news!

The repudiation of the Doctrine of Discovery does not lead to the repudiation of private ownership of titled lands. It has, however, forced governments to take serious of the outstanding claims of crown lands on unceded territory of the Anishnaabeg peoples. It has also propelled our denomination in its continuing journey of reconciliation, through missions and ministries with Indigenous peoples. And that to me is the good news for this generation and beyond. Once we were wicked, but now reformed and transformed. For that, we say ‘thanks be to God’.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**