

A Sermon Preached at Maple Street Congregational Church, UCC
Danvers, MA
Rev. Kevin M Smith
October 29, 2017
Luke 20:9-15

Who Owns the Garden?

A large part of my childhood was spent on a farm. It was the farm of my best friend's family. I helped out on the farm more times than I care to remember. We grew wheat, lots of wheat, and peas and lentils, and in the draws between wheat fields we mowed the Timothy grass and baled it into hay for the livestock of the farm. The days were long, especially at harvest time. The work was hard, all the time. We got dirty, we sweated a lot, and our fingernails were never ever clean. We had calloused hands. The work was never done. From before sunrise to after sunset we were out in the fields of the Albert and Betty Roecks farm. It was a beautiful place.

In the spring and fall the beautiful greens, and browns, and golden yellow patches of the farm field quilt were a site to behold. During harvest time there were thousands and thousands of acres of amber waves of grain blowing in the wind. The harvest would produce bushels and bushels of grain that literally went out to feed the world. The landscape and the people that were my home produced the highest yields of wheat on the planet. Blood, sweat, tears, and beauty flowed in and through this beloved landscape.

My mother and I grew a vegetable garden out by the old shed on our property. We hoed and weeded and planted and delighted in the juicy tomatoes, the crunchy snap peas, and the leafy lettuce grown on that little patch of heaven. Our next door neighbor who happened to be the Lutheran Church pastor in the town also had a beautiful garden. Church grounds seem to be a good place to grow a garden.

Sadly, though, some gardens are not so peaceful and healthy of places. How about those wicked farmhands we read about in our gospel lesson from Matthew this morning? They not only stole the produce of the farm, but they injured and killed the people sent by the farm owner to claim what belonged to the owner. The wealthy farmer tried to protect what he owned by building a fence and even going as far to build a watchtower to spot garden thieves. What the farmer didn't figure on was the evil that was already residing within his own patch of ground. The greedy, wealthy farmer and his even greedier and evil farmhands wanted it all to themselves. One was willing to risk the life of his own son and the others were willing to take that life.

When I think about wars and people starving in the face of abundance for some and not for others, and about the careless stewardship of this fragile planet, and the hoarding of natural resources of the earth for profit, I think of this sad story of the wealthy farmer and the wicked farmhands. As brilliant as we humans like to think we have yet to come up with a system of sharing the bounty of God's earth in a fair, equitable, and sustainable way. This is one of the reasons we gathered the "Neighbors in Need" offering a couple of Sundays ago. The offering is a way we people of faith who follow a generous God can do a little better job of sharing the bounty we have enjoyed.

Giving to the Neighbors in Need offering, helping out our neighbors in Puerto Rico and the South devastated by hurricanes and floods, and joining our new earth ministry project called the Earth Stewards, is another way. Donating to the Las Vegas Victims GoFundMe program is another way of helping your neighbors. Contributing to the Danvers People-to-People Food pantry is always another fine way of sharing. Going on mission trips to help our distant neighbors have habitable living spaces and food to feed their kids is way we can give back to God. We can do these things even in the face of so many people who are willing to wage war and kill over a piece of land or the natural resources that spring forth from that land that really doesn't belong to them in the first place. My friends, no matter the economic system we live in, in the end we are only tenants, only farmhands in the reign of an earth that belongs to God. We human beings are only passing through this land of God's. We forget this fact.

This land was created to last for millions of years or longer and we are just here for a tiny moment. But, it is that moment that ultimately will define how relevant we are to a landscape that belongs to God and future generations of tenants that will come after us. And, many of those tenants will carry our own family DNA and blood.

Let us be wary of those who want to build walls around what they think belongs only to them in their time. Let us be wary of those who would despoil a landscape, or an ocean, for financial gain and territorial power. Let us be relevant to the health and well-being of our neighbor who must share this little, fragile planet with us and with all those generations of our DNA and blood yet to be born. May we engage in a "kingdom life" that builds up love, not greed, extends justice, not inequality, nourishes the lives of hungry children, and cares for amazing beauty and bounty of this little planet that belongs to God and in which we are only visitors. Pray and support Las Vegas, Puerto Rico, Texas, and all our suffering neighbors. Let us live peacefully in the midst of this corner of God's garden. May we be open to discerning and discovering God's vision for the future of the garden that is Maple Street Church. Amen.

