

Dinner reservations: Matthew 21:33-46

by [Roger Lovette](#) in the [September 20, 2005](#) issue

*Jesus said to them, "Have you never read in the scriptures: 'The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord's doing, and it is amazing in our eyes'? Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom." (Matt. 21:42-43)*

The first Sunday of October is World Communion Sunday. Christians around the world remember that we are linked with brothers and sisters of all colors and languages. There is no better time to remind ourselves of this truth than in these days, when so much of the world is divided into a multitude of warring camps.

Chances are many of us seeking a communion text will ignore Matthew 21:33-46. It is hard to see what connections this parable has with us, the table and Christians the world over. We may turn to those other lectionary texts in Psalm 19 or Exodus 20 instead. Or maybe, in the middle of a busy week, we may just dust off an old communion meditation.

Scholars say that this Sunday's parable is an allegory. The parable goes into great detail about the owner's love and care for his farm. He planted the vineyard with his own hands, put a fence around the vineyard, dug a winepress and even constructed a watchtower to protect the vineyard from the enemy. He then employed tenants. God is certainly the landowner. We know that the slaves the owner sends to receive his share of the crops represent prophets and martyrs who have died for the faith through the years. We also know that the owner's son who was killed by the tenants was God's son.

The tenants are the Pharisees. These religious officials rejected those whom God sent. The story says they were furious when Jesus directed his harsh words toward them and called them the poorest of tenants.

But here we are at Holy Communion. The table is set, the candles are lit and the people are waiting. Is it stretching this allegory too far to say the Lord's table could well be the vineyard where "we who earnestly repent of our sins and are in love and

in charity with our neighbors draw near” to be fed and renewed? Could we keepers of the table be the tenants too? God left us with this vineyard to tend and to make productive. When God gave it to us the fields were lush and beautiful. What kind of tenants have we been?

Have we been good tenants of this bread and this wine? Through the years many battles have been fought about who comes to the table and about who partakes. Do we talk of transubstantiation, consubstantiation or symbol? Is the table a sacrament or is it simply a way to call to remembrance Jesus and his love for us? Some of the biggest squabbles in church have been over these issues.

Are we good servants of the table? Jim Wallis says that he once cut out of the Bible all the passages dealing with the poor. He would hold up this Bible and say, “This is the American Bible.” There are many congregations where the poor would not feel comfortable.

Think about all those others who feel out of place as we open the doors and say: “Come.” This past Pentecost Sunday a church in Washington state turned away a hundred worshipers from the communion table because they wore rainbow-colored sashes and ribbons representing the gay movement. During the 2004 presidential election some churches and even bishops said they would deny John Kerry and other political candidates the sacrament because of their stands on abortion and other issues. Are these church officials good tenants?

Thirteen percent of our population is now Hispanic. That’s over 37 million people. I see them working on roofs, cutting lawns and cleaning tables in a restaurant. But I don’t see many of them in the churches that I know. Maybe, as one parishioner told me, “They might just feel more comfortable in their own churches.”

It would be easy to point toward the Pharisees and shake our heads. Perhaps this talk of vineyards and slaves and owners is about once upon a time instead of here and now. Such a strange story seems a long way from the silver trays and broken bread. Yet God has left this parable on the doorsteps of the church and it won’t go away.

A friend told me about an announcement in her church’s weekly newsletter saying that next Sunday the church would celebrate the Lord’s Supper. A new Christian with no church background saw the notice and called up my friend. “I have two questions,” she said. “It’s about this supper thing. Am I invited and how much will it

cost?"

The world is still asking these questions. Can we come? And how much will this supper cost? The way we answer these questions will determine the kind of tenants we are. We still have much work to do. We keep reminding one another that the table is not ours. We just work here. The vineyard belongs to God.