

Matthew 21.33-46
Psalm 19 (selected)
28th Sunday in Ordinary Time

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(A disclaimer: This sermon was written to be spoken, which does not always translate into correct grammatical form for a document written to be read.)

Owners or Stewards?

Incipit: Parable - This morning we begin a series of three sermons on stewardship in general and financial stewardship in particular. Some of you know I like talking about money, how we use our money and the significance of money in our spiritual lives. So I'm just telling your up front where we're headed.

The gospel reading is from the 21st chapter of the gospel of Matthew. In the middle of chapter 21, Jesus has a run-in with the religious leaders who challenge his authority to teach about the ways of God. In our reading this morning we hear a parable Jesus tells the religious leaders in response to their challenge.

Now as you hear this parable, remember that a parable is not a literal story. There are always lots of layers of meaning in parables. There are many angles from which you can look at a parable. And keep in mind that a parable is always a metaphor. So there are always ways in which the parable *points* to the truth about something and ways in which the parable *does not point* to the truth about something.

Matthew 21.33-46 [The word of God / Thanks be to God]

A rich landowner establishes a vineyard. Plants the vines, puts up a fence, creates a winepress to convert the grapes and builds a watchtower for guarding the land. He leased the land to tenants—and then he went away.

If you lived in first-century Palestine and heard Jesus telling this story, you would know exactly what he was talking about. This arrangement between an absent landlord and the tenant farmers was common. We might think of it like the experience of sharecroppers in this country. You don't have enough money to buy the land so you live on land that is not your own, farm it, care for the herds, and pay the land owner out of the harvest. And chances are you still owe

something even if the harvest is destroyed by drought or flood or disease. Most of the time this is an arrangement that benefits the land owner. It's part of the story of the rich get richer and the poor get poorer.

So these tenants, who had watered the plants, pulled the weeds, pruned the branches, kept watch day and night for animals who would steal the grapes when they were ripe, harvested the grapes, processed them into wine...after all that work they didn't feel too kindly toward the landowner who sends his hired hands to collect what the tenants owe him.

And the tenants decide they're not going to give up one bit of their hard-earned harvest so they beat and stone and kill the representatives of the landowner. The landowner sends another group to collect the rent and again they are treated no better than the first group. And then the landowner sends his son—thinking (rather naively) that his tenants will respect his son. But the tenants have no respect and in fact see this as their opportunity to inherit the land. Which sounds odd to us but in that time, if a landowner died without an heir, the tenants could inherit the property.¹ And so they kill the son.

And here those first century Palestinians listening to Jesus' story were probably cheering on the tenant farmers. Because they too, whether they were tenant farmers or city dwellers, lived under somebody's thumb—somebody who had more power and was always squeezing them with more taxes or higher rent.

But Jesus turns the parable on its head and instead of the tenants inheriting the vineyard, they are thrown out and the vineyard is leased to new tenants who will give the landowner the rent at harvest time.

In thinking about a parable being like metaphor—how it points to what something is like and what something is not like—let me say a couple things I think this parable is not about.

First, I don't think verse 43 (“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.”) is about the Jews being unfaithful and so God has abandoned them and chosen Christians instead. I do think it's about religious leaders who have gotten hung up on their own power and have forgotten who they are serving—and have twisted it around to make sure *they* are being served.

¹ Carl Schenck, “Backyard and Vineyards” in *Lectionary Homiletics*, vol. XVI, no. 6, Oct/Nov 2005, p16.

Second, while it's pretty easy to make a parallel that the landowner is God, the guys who come to collect the rent are the prophets and the son is Jesus, I don't think we want to (or have to) say that the way God operates is the same way the landowner operates—as an absentee landlord or as a landowner who comes back to the vineyard to make sure the tenants experience a torturous death.

I think this is a place where the parable is a parable and not a story we are forced to use as an exact parallel for how God works in the world.

One thing I do think the parable is about is ownership and stewardship.

The tenants want to own the land. They've worked it, they've cared for it, they've worried over it, they've seen tiny buds form into leaves, blossoms into fruit and now made fruit into wine. Isn't that the American dream? Owning a piece of land, tilling the soil, growing the vegetables that you eat for dinner, gathering the eggs for your breakfast. Okay, so maybe for most of us here today, we'd rather go to the grocery store or eat out but so much of this country was founded on that American Dream of owning a piece of land, taking care of yourself and your family.

Ownership was important from the beginning of this nation. Buying (which is really a euphemism for “primarily stealing”) the land from native people who were the first inhabitants. Plot lines, deeds, titles, land surveys...and all those things that are still important when you buy a piece of property. You want to make sure that you own the property free and clear—that no one else has a claim on it.

But those are not the values of the realm of God, Jesus tells us. The tenants in our parable got confused about the possibility of owning the vineyard. The land, the vines, the wine press, the watchtower—none of it is for sale. None of what the landowner owns is for sale and it never will be. Because the owner is not looking for buyers. The owner is looking for tenants who will give the owner the share of the produce due at harvest time.

Which means that the real issue is stewardship. Because a steward is someone who tends to and manages the business on behalf of the owner.

The people in the parable who worked the vineyard saw themselves as tenants—potentially exploited by the owner—looking for a leg up which would make them owners and not

tenants any more. What the owner was looking for was stewards—people who would serve as a representative of the owner, caring for the owner’s interests and concerns.

And if you go back to the first chapter of Genesis, where we learn that we are made in God’s image, then we discover that part and parcel of our human identity is to be stewards—God’s stewards. And to be God’s stewards “means that God’s purpose for us is to do in our [communities] what God does in the world at large: [which is] seeking “to create circumstances in which all elements of creation live in love, mutual support, and abundance.”²

We often talk about stewardship just as meaning what we do with our money—and that is part of it—but stewardship is about everything that we are and everything that we do. As God’s stewards, we are entrusted to look after this particular metaphorical vineyard leased to us. And that has to do with “how we treat our children, how much energy we use, the kinds of clothes we wear, the degree to which we enter into solidarity with the poor, the stands we take on issues in public life”³ and yes, how we use our money—the part we give to benefit others and the part we keep for ourselves.

Here’s a little more about the money: Do you remember earlier this summer when we were preaching through the book of Genesis that God blessed Abraham and Sarah and told them that their blessing was in order that all the families of the earth would be blessed through them? Well, we continue in that line of blessing. God blesses us, not for our own edification but for the blessing to be shared with all of creation.

As a congregation we are called to witness to God’s love for all and God’s will for justice for all so that all may have life abundant. This witness requires resources of money and time. “Exercising [financial] stewardship through the church is an every Sunday way of saying, ‘I am committed to God and [committed] to help the world become a place of blessing for all.’”

Now let me say a word about that every Sunday practice. And I want to issue a challenge about financial stewardship and your pledge for 2006. Some of you look at your financial situation and realistically say there is not a dollar to spare and so you choose not to give anything. Others of you look at your financial picture, you’ve made the same pledge each year but realistically say you can’t afford to give any more. And I know there have been a lot of requests

² Ronald J. Allen, “Preaching Stewardship” in *Lectionary Homiletics*, vol. XVI, no. 6, Oct/Nov 2005, p1.

³ *Ibid.*

for financial assistance between last year's tsunami, two hurricanes in the gulf coast, now a powerful earthquake in Pakistan and India.

I want to invite you to consider a three-month spiritual practice. The practice would be to give more than you have been giving—and that could be a dollar more a month, or a dollar more a week or ten dollars more a week—whatever is right between you and God. The practice will be to give that additional money from the beginning of January to the end of March 2006.

But I don't want you to do it because we need it for the budget—because that's not what I'm talking about. And I don't want you to do it because you feel your arm is twisted or you are being coerced.

If you take this challenge, there's a second part of the practice. Every time you write your check or every time you put cash in your weekly envelope, I want you to pray—to offer your money to God, to offer all of your life to God and to ask God to use you to be a blessing to the world.

And at the end of the three months, take stock of what has happened in your life. What has changed in your relationship with God? What has changed in your relationship with your money? What has changed in the way your life is a blessing to others?

And if it hasn't been worth it, then go back to what you were giving before. But if it has been worth it...you may want to keep doing it.

Why am I asking you to consider this practice? Because I think what we do here each week—week after week—can and does shape what we do in the rest of life. “The act of placing money in the offering plate represents our intention to give our whole lives to God's purposes. [Our money] is not an end but is a symbol of how we should understand our whole existence.”⁴

And that is, that we are stewards. Called by God for service. Serving the great and gracious God of love; the God of justice and joy, compassion and peace. At the core of our creation, we are created for this service. Serving the God who first loves us. Who delights in us and blesses us and calls us to be a blessing to the world.

⁴ *Ibid.*