

Sermon at St. John's, Williamstown, MA  
 "Caretakers in God's Vineyard"

Proper 22A  
 Matthew 21:33-46

October 8, 2017

*"Almighty God, whose loving hand has given us all that we possess: grant us grace that we may honor you with our substance, and, remembering the account which we must one day give, may be faithful stewards of your bounty, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen."*

That is a prayer for stewardship from our *Book of Common Prayer* (p. 827). Stewardship, as expressed in the call to make a pledge for the coming year, is an important part of the rhythm of life in the fall in most churches. St. John's is no exception, with a strong emphasis on stewardship in October each year, but stewardship ought to be a year-round endeavor encompassing far more than just a financial pledge. Our stewardship chair, Mary Lovvorn, does a good job of keeping the idea of stewardship before us throughout the year with articles in our monthly parish newsletter, "The Prologue." Stewardship is ultimately about how we care for all the blessings with which our creator God has entrusted us; and I think our gospel lesson today has something to teach us about that kind of stewardship.

"Listen to another parable," Jesus says. "Let me tell you a story about a landowner who planted a vineyard." Who doesn't enjoy a story? Stories hook our imagination. They draw us into a plot. In this case, we wonder what is going to happen to that vineyard and the characters who tend it. In Jesus' parable, a vineyard owner expects to enjoy good fruit, but finds the caretakers—the stewards—of the vineyard making a mockery of that expectation. They are miserable at the task of stewardship.

Biblical scholars characterize this story told by Jesus as belonging to the genre of allegory, rather than being a typical parable. We can name the correspondences. It's easy enough to see that God, the creator of all, is the owner of the vineyard. It's equally easy to see that in the original telling of the story, the vineyard workers are the Pharisees and chief priests. When they hear the story, they realize that Jesus is speaking about them. In their ultimate rejection of Jesus, they reject the son of the vineyard owner. Not only do they fail to produce the sought-after fruit of the vineyard, but they try to cover up their poor care-taking by getting rid of the one who comes to receive the fruits of their labor. It doesn't work. The tenants want to believe they are the ones in control and that they have become the owners, but that path only leads to wrongdoing and great loss. They are unable to accept that God's loving hand has given them all they possess and when called to give an account of themselves (to give back to God the produce of the vineyard), they respond with greed and violence rather than faithfulness.

What happens if we move out of the original context to our own? Could it be that we are the vineyard workers, the tenant farmers, the stewards of God's harvest? We know the tenant farmers in the allegory were poor stewards. Perhaps the question to ask today is "How are we doing as stewards of God's vineyard?" As we ponder that question, keep in mind the basic understanding that God is the creator and we are God's creatures, God's workers, stewards of God's creation, tenants (not owners). To God we owe our ability to work, our tools (our gifts and skills), our very existence, and the existence of all the rich resources of the natural world. In essence, yes, we most certainly owe God everything! What does that say to us about our stewardship—our giving?

The story is told of a person who in a weary voice asked an angel, "Must I keep on giving forever?" "Oh, no," said the angel, "only as long as God keeps giving to you." "Only as long as God keeps giving to you." (source unknown) So when can we legitimately, with a free conscience, stop giving? Scripture and tradition tell us that God never stops giving, so it seems to me that we are never off the hook!

Christian stewardship is a life-style commitment that recognizes our responsibility to care for the world in which God has placed us, giving back to God what God has so freely given us. Everything belongs to God. We are but caretakers and workers in God's vineyard. Stewardship then becomes a matter of "using the gifts God has given us to do the work God has called us to do." (Terry Parsons, former Stewardship Officer for the Episcopal Church)

There are three components of stewardship: Time, Talent, and Treasure.

**Time:** Those here in worship today are giving your time. Participants in Godly Play and Lift Every Voice and Coffee Conversations and Bible Study and The Feast and other small groups give their time, as do the leaders of those groups, who invest preparation time to deliver interesting lessons and engage people in dialogue and song helping all ages grow spiritually and practically. Altar Guild, layreaders, ushers, musicians, acolytes, and eucharistic ministers all regularly give their time to make our worship go smoothly. Those participating in the interfaith criminal justice education/advocacy group that met for the first time last Thursday are giving their time and energy in response to a major issue. There are other advocacy and action issues that beg for our attention – the Opioid Addiction Epidemic, Racial Reconciliation, and the Prevention of Gun Violence, to name just three. Many of you give your time to write cards, make phone calls, run errands for others, take care of an aging family member or grandchild, or reach out to a friend in need. In the area of pastoral care, many of you also give your time to outreach ministries, such as the monthly Take and Eat Meal Preparation and Delivery Project,

our Garden of Eatin', Friendship Food Pantry, our Recycling Project, the Dream Center, BIO, or the Berkshire Food Project. There are so many ways to invest our time in being good stewards of God's vineyard. How will you be a good steward of the time with which you are entrusted?

**Talent:** Our choirs, both the adult choir and the new children's chorus, are made up of people who choose to invest their musical talents in this part of God's vineyard. Those with a gift for healing offer that talent freely on Sunday mornings at the altar. Others have used their carpentry or artistic talents or culinary skills or photography talent or technical skills to enhance the beauty and functionality of this place. Those with gardening talents have helped create a bountiful harvest (now almost 800 pounds) of vegetables to share with the Friendship Food Pantry or have planted and maintained lovely pots of flowers to soften and make more inviting the entrances to this building. This is an extraordinarily talented congregation. Where do you fit in? Are you using your talents wisely and generously as stewards of God's vineyard?

**Treasure:** Yes, there is a dollar sign attached to this component of stewardship. Talking about it may make some of us uncomfortable, but our stewardship speakers have taken on the task of modeling a willingness to engage this component of stewardship. Over the last two months, this congregation has given school supplies, backpacks, and over \$800 to ease the school year for a number of children in North Adams and over 100 stuffed animals for children in Houston shelters. You have also given about \$4000 to ERD for hurricane & earthquake recovery and another \$1000 last week specifically for Puerto Rico from Raile's Bowl and outreach matching funds. That's almost \$6000 of treasure donated in only a few weeks time, mostly above and beyond the operating budget! We are blessed with an abundance and are generously sharing it for specific needs. Work on the first draft of the 2018 parish budget has begun and an Outreach Group met last week to decide on how to allocate the over \$20,000 allotted in the 2017 budget for gifts to organizations doing outreach ministry in our region and internationally. I appreciated the careful and caring manner in which the outreach group worked through its decision-making process for this year and began to consider refining the process for greater effectiveness and accountability in the future. As our Treasurer, Tom Nicholson, and I went through the line items in the 2018 budget this week, we both noted that how we allocate our financial resources tells us much about what we value as a congregation. Your pledges are the primary component of the parish budget. What do you value as individuals and families? Does your giving line up with those values? As we begin to more clearly name St. John's values as a faith community, can we stretch ourselves to make the whole vineyard a better investment for God? These are questions to ask as we continue to give to the best of our abilities to support the ongoing work and mission of God through this church.

Stewardship involves far more than just keeping the lights on, the heating systems working, and the staff paid. Those are important only insofar as they enable us to do the work of building the kingdom of God. In this year of transition between rectors, St. John's has been secure enough and bold enough to risk expanding its ministries. A new parish directory is in production, we have a functional website, and the computer databases have been significantly updated. We have creatively expanded Christian formation for all ages and added new support groups for adult children of alcoholics and those affected by cancer, a community Children's Chorus with 20 youngsters participating, a new Parish Life Team sponsoring new fellowship events, new ways of welcoming people, and a Centering Prayer Group. In the midst of these programmatic additions and administrative upgrades, the RenewalWorks, Profile, and Search Teams have done important work, and we have now formed a search team for a new organist & choir director. From my perspective, this has been an exciting year! I hope that's true from your perspective, also.

The theme of this year's Fall Stewardship Season is "Journey to Generosity." This congregation is most definitely on that journey. Some have more time to give, others more talents, others more money. We all need to consider each of these areas in light of our values as we choose what we will offer to God day by day in gratitude for God's most generous gifts to us. God does not force our response, but does in the end hold us accountable for our task as stewards. Please consider your commitment prayerfully and do your best to honor it, just as God honors God's commitment to us. That's what being laborers in the vineyard – caretakers or stewards of God's creation – is all about.

Fear causes people to hoard their resources. Arrogance sometimes leads to destruction. The story Jesus tells in Matthew's gospel is incredibly sad. In an effort to take for their own the riches with which they had been entrusted, the tenants went on a rampage of arrogant destruction. The biggest mistake the tenants in Jesus' story made was to think the vineyard was theirs for the taking. We make a mistake if we think all our "possessions" – our time, talent, and treasure – are ours alone. If we can shift that thinking, as Jesus calls us to do today, then we will be well on the road to becoming good and generous stewards.

May our work in God's vineyard be faithful and fruitful, as we give back to God what God so freely gives to us day by day. Amen.

The Rev. Libby Wade  
Interim Rector

