

TENANTS NOT OWNERS

Matthew 21:33-46

23 years ago back in 1988 the General Convention of the Episcopal Church made a theological statement that surprised many people. “*Stewardship*,” they affirmed in a one page document endorsed by both the House of Deputies and the House of Bishops, “*is the main work of the Church.*” If stewardship is *everything we do with everything we have* and the mission of the Church as stated in the BCP is to “*restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ,*” then “*the main work of the Church is involving people in using all that is entrusted to them in carrying out that mission.*” The statement that I still find to be clear, fresh and timely goes on to say that:

- *Stewardship is more than church support; it is the use of the gifts given to us to carry on Christ’s work of reconciliation in the world.*
- *Stewardship is more than a duty: it is the thankful response to God’s graciousness to us. As such, it is an opportunity to praise God with our lives in thanksgiving:*
 - *For the blessings of creation*
 - *For the birth, life, teaching, death, and resurrection of J.C. and our redemption*
 - *For the gift of the Spirit*
 - *For the word, sacraments, and fellowship that sustain and transform us as a Church*

Stewardship is an adventure, an expedition into the kingdom where we find our lives through losing them for the sake of the gospel. It is an invitation to offer our gifts for the purpose for which we were created – the only purpose that will fulfill us.

Stewardship is the main work of the Church.

Jesus’ parable of the wicked tenants makes a similar point. To begin with it is a parable about true ownership. Who owned the land? Who planted the vineyard? Who put a fence around it? Who dug the wine press? Who built the watch tower? Who gave the tenants the right to live in the vineyard and tend it? *The landowner!* And yet the wicked tenants pretended that they owned the land. Despite the fact that if not tenants then they were *squatters* they acted as if they owned the vineyard and refused to acknowledge their responsibilities as tenants.

How often we are in the same position as those tenants. Who made the universe? Who created humankind in his own image? Who gave us life? Who sustains that life? Who gave us our innate ability? Who gave us the opportunities we enjoy to thrive and prosper? God, like the landowner in Jesus’ parable, may not be visibly present but that does not make him any less responsible for everything we have. We are not the owners of our own lives, of our so-called possessions. Ultimately they belong not to our selves but to God. But how many times and how many ways do we deny God’s ownership? We act as if everything we have is ours by right. We act as if we alone were responsible for ourselves, for our abilities, for our wealth, for our time. Do we in fact acknowledge that God is ultimately in charge, that God is responsible and that we are tenants (renters).

And what acknowledgement do we give to God the giver? What rent do we pay in return for all that we enjoy as tenants of God's creation?

That lesson came home to me when I received a note in my own handwriting that I promised to begin to give God a portion (a percentage) of our income and to work towards making that percentage a full tithe (10% of all that we received as income). I'd almost forgotten about that commitment. You see it was easy to make in March in the bloom of enthusiasm I felt at a conference on stewardship, 6-months before pledge time. It was entirely different to stare at that commitment with a pledge card in hand and realize the actual cost of what I'd promised. My wife was a bit shocked too, especially since I'd never shared my promise with her until that point. Such a promise involved both of us and we wrestled very hard with whether or not we wanted to do such a thing. But in the end we agreed to. It took us 7 years to move from giving 2% of our income to God's work to giving 10%. Along the way we learned to put 10% of each paycheck, in a "God's" section of our checkbook. God allows us to choose what part of his work to which we will apply it, but by doing that over many years we have come to know and appreciate the fact that all we have comes from God and is not our own. By giving our first fruits, 10% off the top, not what's left over but right off the top, we're better able to get that most important theological fact through our thick skulls. All we have comes from God and this is part of our return in thanks and praise for all he gives to us.

The lesson that God is the real owner is learned in many other ways. I know many friends whose addiction to alcohol or other drugs became so destructive that their lives and the lives of their loved ones were shattered. Only when they reached the place of absolute despair and hopelessness and admitted total defeat were they able to surrender and let go of pretending to control the substance that had taken control of them. In that despair they were able to let go of their control and ask desperately for help from God or some power higher than them. That letting go of control, that acknowledgement that they weren't in charge was in each of their cases the first step into life, the first step of Alcoholics Anonymous.

Realization of the power of sin and self-deception in our own lives, confessing our own brokenness and asking for help, is pretty much the same process. In Christian terms we call it *repentance*. And what brings us to repentance is usually not a very pretty picture. But the results of repentance is the tacit acknowledgement that we're not entrepreneurial self-made men and women. We're not self-sufficient. We need God and only with God's help and God's forgiveness can we begin to turn around and find true life, life that is worth living.

The first part of Jesus' parable of the wicked tenants is about true ownership. The second part deals with the landowners son, the heir. Jesus is quite obviously referring to himself in this parable. If Jesus is the Son, what did he ask of Israel – the tenants of God's vineyard – to give back as produce to God his Father, the true landowner? In his stories and teaching in the Gospel we see him asking for...

- Gratitude
- Changed hearts
- To forgive as they had been forgiven
- To love as they were loved

- To have faith
- He invited people into a new relationship with God as Father, to recognize God's intent and not just live according to rules and laws
- To repent and receive the good news of God's Kingdom, a Kingdom both alive and present in their midst and still to come.

The wicked tenants killed the son in the parable. And in real life they took God's Son, Jesus and nailed him to a tree. Only in the real world of God's love, God's Kingdom, the tenants were not "*wretches put to a miserable death.*" The tenants – God's people (you and me) – are invited to enter, through the power of Jesus' death and resurrection, into a new existence, a new and spiritual vineyard.

Jesus told them that the stone that the builders rejected had become the cornerstone. "*The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls.*" As Jesus – the only begotten Son of God the Father – was broken for us upon the cross, so our hearts are broken as we experience that passion. "*For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for Christ's sake, and for the sake of the Gospel, will save it.*" (Mk. 8:35) It is only in dying with Christ, in being broken to pieces upon that rock that has become the cornerstone, that our hearts are healed and that we are reborn into God's heavenly Kingdom.

So, as grateful tenants of God's Vineyard, how can we acknowledge God's ownership and return the portion of his produce which is due?

- The first acknowledgement is gratitude and thanks for all we receive from God's hand.
- Next is our worship, our adoration and praise. As you worship God, love God. Sing with joy to your creator. Offer God your grateful heart. Worship him in the beauty of holiness.
- After loving God with our whole heart, soul, strength and mind comes loving our neighbor. I love getting email from Dell Kendal because she has the beautiful tag line at the end of every email: "*Service is the rent we pay for the room we occupy in this world.*" Serving others is part of that produce we owe our Lord and Maker.
- Part of our return to God is the support for that institution built on Christ the cornerstone, his Church. Our support by time, talent and treasure to the work of his Church.
- He invites us to forgive as we have been forgiven.
- He invites us to treat others as we ourselves would like to be treated and to love your neighbor as yourself.
- He also expects us to bring others into his Kingdom, to share the good news we have received and not to try and keep it for ourselves alone.

In all these ways we return to God some return on the riches of his grace. And in doing so we discover what our General Convention in 1988 said so well, *stewardship is the main work of the Church.*