

The Reverend Matthew Hanisian
St. Martin's-in-the-Field Episcopal Church
Proper 22A
October 8, 2017
Matthew 21:33-46

Jesus said, "Listen to another parable. There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a wine press in it, and built a watchtower. Then he leased it to tenants and went to another country. When the harvest time had come, he sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his produce. But the tenants seized his slaves and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. Again he sent other slaves, more than the first; and they treated them in the same way. Finally he sent his son to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.' But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, 'This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance.'" So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him. Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?" They said to him, "He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the harvest time."

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. The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls."

When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they realized that he was speaking about them. They wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowds, because they regarded him as a prophet.

Is there a theme with this morning's readings?

I get this parable...right up until the part where the tenants say, "Hey! That's the heir to the place, let's go and kill him and then we'll get to keep all of this." That part doesn't make a lick of sense to me....because, well, the owner still owns the vineyard and that's not how inheritance works.

The actors: God = the landowner who plants the vineyard. God created the world...all that is and everything in it, even you and even me.

Tenants = The chief priest and Pharisees....those who were given care over the vineyard while the owner went away.

Slaves = the prophets God sent to tell Israel (the tenants...and well, now you and me) to get their act together and remember that God is due some of the produce of the harvest.

The heir = Jesus, God's son.

The other tenants = US. We are the inheritors of the vineyard. There is much fruit that we produce, many gifts that the landowner has given to us, and we are obligated to give God a portion of that.

In fact, when we think about the gifts we have been given and the abundance of fruit that has been produced, at a very basic level there is the gift of our lives—the gift that is each of us. And how we respond to that basic gift is critical to our survival. How we respond to that gift should be that we love one another—remember that Jesus sums up all of the laws and all of the teachings of the prophets as loving God with all of you and that you love your neighbor as yourself. So how we respond to this gift is to love and care for one another. The mass shooting in Las Vegas is exactly the opposite of what God in Christ commands. Killing another denies that basic gift, takes that gift of life away from another.

We are required to respond with love and care for the other, love and care for ourselves. As a parish, our lives together in this community means our response to God's gift of our lives, of our skills and talents and gifts and wealth is to give of those things as a joyful response to all that the landowner has given to us tenant farmers in this vineyard.

Couple of key ideas that we need to get honest about and fast if we are to understand how being good tenants, those who are stewards in and of the vineyard, should act.

1. God, the owner of the vineyard, owns everything. All of it. All of creation. God has given us everything. Our homes, our successes, our failures, our smarts, our charming personalities and good looks, the ability we have to earn money, even our very lives belong to God.

If we get this fact and truly understand it, the second point is so easy. In fact it is the easiest thing we can do to be good tenants, to being good stewards of this vineyard....

2. God wants us to keep 90% of everything that God has given us, that God has blessed us with; that God has poured out on us with such abundance as to be ludicrous how much we have been given. Think about everything in your life—EVERYTHING. Those are all gifts from God. You have a roof over your head—Thanks be to God. You can feed your family—Thanks be to God. You earn a decent wage and even have money socked away—Thanks be to God. People listen to you because you say things that are worth listening to—Thanks be to God. You are loved—thanks be to God.

If God has given you all of those things—and I'm only scratching the surface here, your list of blessings, all of the ways that God has made you rich from so much produce of this vineyard—we have SO MUCH to be thankful for.

God says, “Look, everything comes from me, and, well, you're welcome. But be good tenants...be good stewards of all that I've entrusted you with. Don't be greedy. You can have 90% of all of it, go have fun. I'd like you to give back—as a sign that you get it, and a sign that you are thankful for all of this...I just want 10%; you keep the rest.”

If we get that and we DO IT, God will know that we understand what being good stewards, what being good tenants of what's been leased to us is all about. Right relationship.

When we are in right relationship with God—which is all that God really wants from us to be honest (everything that Jesus teaches about it how we can and need to and MUST get our heads and hearts into relationship with God) we are more fully living into being good tenants, good stewards of the vineyard. Part of that relationship is tending to the vineyard and the vines that are producing an abundance of fruit. We are able to tend the vineyard because of the gifts, skills, talents, knowledge, wisdom, and all the rest that God has lavished upon us.

When we are in right relationship with God, we trust that God is in control of things and that God's plan for us—even though we might not understand it or get it, or that the plan might seem downright horrible in the moment—that God has a plan for us and that plan is born out of nothing but intense love for us. We have to trust God, and trust God completely.

Being in right relationship means that we have to recognize our dependence on God alone. That means that we recognize, believe and live into the simple fact that only God can truly give us salvation—and let's be clear here: I'm not talking about salvation when we die—we've already been given that. I'm talking about salvation in the here and now. I'm talking about things like forgiveness, wholeness, true love...things that will change our lives forever, not things that are fleeting. There's a crass old saying that, "It is true that money can't buy love...but it sure can rent it for a few hours."

That's what our wealth can do for us—rent us happiness, satisfaction, acceptance...but only for a time, usually a very short time. When we put our trust in the wealth we have accumulated as the safety net for our lives we are telling God: "Hey God, that's nice and all, but honestly, I know better, and I'd rather invest in the stock market—or I'd rather depend on my financial planner's wisdom than trust your wisdom. Honestly, I'm not too sure that I DO trust you, actually."

Proper care of the vineyard, and proper relationship with God are intertwined. Proper care of the vineyard looks like: taking what has been leased to us—given to us—entrusted to us because we have certain skills and abilities that allow for our portion of the vineyard, if we take good care of it—and go grow and produce "good fruit." Jesus goes on and on in Luke's gospel about producing "good fruit"—another sermon for another time. If we are good stewards of what we have been given (which, remember, is EVERYTHING in our lives) we owe a portion of the produce from the vineyard back to the owner.

What happens in this parable is interesting to note: Notice that there is not a production problem. The vineyard is producing just fine. The vineyard owner isn't angry with those wicked tenants because nothing is growing...in fact quite the opposite—look at your lives, all of it...notice that God has entrusted you with a myriad of tools, skills and wisdom. Notice also in your life you have been put into some rocky soil upon occasion, but that overall I'll be that all in, an overwhelming majority of the time God has put you in some vastly fertile locations where you have produced fruit abundantly. So, production is not the issue here.

What seems to be broken is the delivery system for the fruit. We tenants are the delivery system. We are happy receiving the goodness and blessings that God has swamped us with...but when it comes to showing our gratitude and thanks back to God, the landowner, well, let's just say we have some work to do there. When I was a store manager for the department store chain Target, they had a term for that on our annual reviews...we have a "growing edge" when it comes to the delivery system for the fruit that needs to go back to God the landowner.

Here's some math for us to consider. This data comes from the 2015 Census Bureau data for Severna Park, Maryland. The median household income is \$125,805. So, if we are forging right relationship with God and we are the median household income, for round numbers let's call it \$12.5K gets given back to God in a sign that we are so thankful for all that's been bestowed upon us. Last year there were 138 pledging households to St. Martin's. If everyone gave only the 10% of the median income...St. Martin's would have an operating budget—to do the work of God in the world, to be the light that shines in the darkness, to educate make disciples here in this place...\$1.7 MILLION dollars.

Here's the reality though: As a community of tenants in the bountiful vineyard here, last year we gave back to God out of the abundance that we are blessed with and have received again and again in our lives...we gave back to God \$588K. Or a difference of almost 1.13M\$.

I'll be honest with you: there is a direct correlation between how much we give and the depth of our faith. The more we have faith in, and trust in God, the more that things like money and material wealth become NOT something that we worry about losing, that we hoard, that we cling to more than we cling to our relationship with the Almighty...the more faith and trust we have in God the happier and more joyful we are about giving. As the scripture says, "God loves a cheerful giver." And, we have MUCH to be cheerful and generous tenants about.

I know that some here are already at the 10% giving level, but I would like to challenge us, that wherever we are in our giving—which is our response to God's bountiful giving to us—that we decide to move up a percentage point or two in this coming year, with the goal being that in 5 years we are all at that 10% giving mark. And it isn't I who is asking this, it God is. Your vestry is not asking this of us, Jesus who speaks to us this morning in this parable IS. And, Jesus asks us this, because the truth is that in the end, this is ALL about our NEED to give, to be in better relationship with God, to grow our faith in God...SO much MORE than it is about the church's need to receive.

In the coming weeks we will launch our new Annual Response Campaign. I'd like us to intentionally change our language from "Stewardship Campaign" where we think about things like pledges, to "Annual Response Campaign" where we think about our response to the gifts and blessings that God has bestowed upon us. And the Annual Response Campaign is only one small portion of a new focus that we will have here at St. Martin's: how we are good stewards of all that God has so lovingly given to us, and that we are

charged with giving back to God, helping the very in-breaking of the Kingdom of God here at St. Martin's.

Now, in the coming weeks you will READ about the ways in which our fellow St. Martin-ites think about how God has inspired them in their personal response to God's blessings. You will HEAR from parishioners as they share with us not about "What St. Martin's means to me," but instead, "How I've come to understand my need to give back to God out of the abundance God has given first to me." You will SEE images of our ministries in action, how through our gifts we enable the work of the Holy Spirit that leads us and guides us as we help heal and enliven this broken world. And, if I can think of a way for us to smell and taste ways that we have responded to God's love and blessings I'll do that too.

We are about deepening our faith here at St. Martin's. We are about creating disciples for our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ here at St. Martin's. We are about looking for and seeing the whirlwind of creative energy and inspiration that is the gift of the Holy Spirit alive and active here at St. Martin's. We are about loving God with all our heart and mind and body and soul, and being moved with love and compassion to love our neighbors as ourselves here at St. Martin's. And now we will ALSO be about responding with joy and thanksgiving for all that God has so richly blessed us with as tenants in this incredible vineyard of St. Martin's-in-the-Field.

AMEN.