

**Tenants or Stewards?**  
**Matthew 21:33-46, Pentecost 21, Year A**  
**5 October 2008**  
**By The Reverend Barkley Thompson**

At a relatively early age, my brother was one who protected and hoarded his hard-earned money. When we were teenagers, he was shocked at the price of concessions at the movie theater. One day at breakfast when my mother poured the last of the Cheerios into a bowl, my brother asked, “Can I have that box?” She gave it to him, and he quickly squirreled it away. As time went on, I began to realize there were fewer and fewer cereal options at breakfast. My brother, it seemed, was absconding with every Kellogg’s box he could get his hands on. Then one Friday evening he and I decided to go to the movie. I waited and waited in the car for him, and finally he emerged from the house wearing a much-too-big overcoat. Upon closer inspection, his body under the coat seemed to be lumpy and swollen, except that the lumps had corners.

“What’s wrong with you?” I asked. With a smile, my brother removed the coat to reveal that he had strapped to every conceivable surface on his body cereal boxes filled with popcorn. Never again, he said with self-satisfaction, would he fall prey to the movie theatre’s exorbitant prices. His money was *his*, and he was protecting it.

Well, you can imagine that standing at the ticket counter with my brother was uncomfortable to say the least. The vender stared

suspiciously at the various box-like growths protruding from his overcoat. Pretty soon I quit going to the movie with my brother.

We're both in our mid-thirties now. A year or so ago I found myself at home in the middle of the summer. It was a blazing hot Arkansas July, one of those weekends in which even the modest will shed every possible iota of clothing. One afternoon I had the bright idea to go see a movie. I asked my brother, who was also home, if he might want to go with me. "Absolutely," he said as he wiped sweat from his brow, "Give me just a minute to get my coat..."

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There is something odd about the way Jesus begins the parable we read in today's Gospel. Unlike most other parables, here Jesus goes to some length to set the scene. "There was a landowner who planted a vineyard," Jesus says. "He put a fence around it, dug a winepress, and built a watchtower." We are told that only then did the landowner turn the vineyard over to his tenants. Why does Jesus give us this detail? What difference does it make? He is explaining to us that before placing the tenants in his vineyard the landowner readies it for them. He prepares it so they can flourish.

How do the tenants respond? When the harvest comes in, do they give the landowner the first fruits he is due in thanksgiving for the abundance he has made possible? No, they ignore what the landowner has done for them and convince themselves that the fruit of their labor—and even the vineyard itself—rightfully belongs to *them*. They bully the

landowner's agents and finally kill his son, in the mistaken hope that this will grant them *possessive ownership* of the vineyard in which they live.

Jesus' choice of words to describe the inhabitants of the vineyard is instructive. Parables about property left in the care of others are common, but elsewhere Jesus refers to such people "stewards," those who know that the things left in their care truly belong to another. But here alone he uses a word meaning "tenants" or "renters." The difference in outlook of a tenant or renter and a steward is vast. In my own experience, I have rented a home, and at other times I have been granted the use of another's home as a guest—or steward, so to speak—and the difference in how I have treated each is considerable.

These are tenants, and worse, they try to claim "squatter's rights" and see the vineyard as something that exists to be used (and perhaps used up) by them. Never do they see themselves as stewards of that which belongs to another and has been entrusted to their care.

We discover why this matters when Jesus drops the bombshell that the *owner* of the vineyard is God himself, and the vineyard is the world of abundance and grace in which God has placed all of us. And so we realize that a question is laid before *us*: In God's vineyard, do *we* live as tenants or stewards?

In the parable, before populating his vineyard the owner readies it so that the tenants can flourish. He doesn't place them in a wild and unprepared plot of land but rather in a vineyard cultivated by his care. Just so, God has not thrown us—any of us—into a wild and forbidding world. Despite any and all challenges—and today there are many—we

find ourselves in a world of gracious abundance. We enjoy food and water from the good earth. We enjoy an advanced civilization, higher education, political freedom, and the spiritual nurture of the Church. We are—each of us—born into a world in which all of these exist and are made ready for us, not *by us* and not *by chance* but by the gracious will of a loving God.

Do we acknowledge and respond? Do we live in the world as tenants or as stewards? How can we tell? In Jesus' parable, this question turns on the tangible. The tenants convince themselves that the vineyard in which they are blessed to live and which is entrusted to their care is, or rightly should be, their own possession. They deny the owner the first fruits of the land, and they do anything they can to set themselves up in the owner's place.

Do we do the same? Do we presume that the abundant world into which God has placed us is in fact of our own making? Do we presume that the fruits of our labor belong first to us? Do we devise any means and justification to cling fast to the blessings we enjoy, anxious that if we loose our hold we'll lose everything?

The *Christian Century* magazine recently published the results of an extensive survey on Christian giving, which suggests that the answer to these questions is all too often, "Yes."<sup>1</sup> The average Christian family gives only 2.9 percent of its income to the ministry of the Church. In truth the reality is even starker than that. 2.9% is a mean, and as such it's skewed by those few who give considerably more. Median giving is

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<sup>1</sup> "Who gives?" in *The Christian Century*, October 7, 2008, pp. 26-29.

a more accurate assessment of where most fall, and the median American Christian returns to God .62 percent—barely ½ of 1 percent—of annual income. At such levels, there is no way the Church can continue to advance or even maintain the work of the Gospel: tending the sick, the grieving, the lonely, and the lost in the world.

Stewardship—the act of being stewards—certainly is not restricted to monetary giving. Giving back to God a proportion of our lives through *service* to God’s church also marks the difference between tenant and steward. Here at St. John’s something exciting is happening. In a world mired in a tenant mentality, stewards are being formed. More and more people are coming; more and more people are serving; and, in ways that enable us to be about vital and life-transforming ministry, more and more people are giving.

The shift from tenant to steward is not an easy one. What is required if we are to make it? What has to happen if we, in an uncertain world but also one brimming with the abundant grace of God, are to become those who give back to God through both our faithful labor and our treasure?

Last week in my class at the Gathering we talked about the meaning of faith, and among faith’s definitions we included both *trust* and *vision*.<sup>2</sup> Faith as trust entails letting go of our anxieties as when children learning to swim finally let go of the rigid tension that causes them to sink and instead rest on the buoyancy of the water. Faith is trusting in the buoyancy of God. Marcus Borg asks, “If we were not

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<sup>2</sup> These concepts come from chapter 2 in Marcus Borg’s *The Heart of Christianity*.

anxious, can you imagine how free we would be, how immediately present we would be able to be, how well we would be able to love?”

And what allows us to trust in this way that *lets go* of the anxieties which cause us possessively to cling to the blessings in our life as if they are our own creation? A second facet of faith, that of *vision*. Faith as vision looks out upon the world and sees it as though through *God's eyes*. It sees a world that, even in the midst of all its contingencies, is brimming with an abundance of blessing. It sees a vineyard well-prepared by God rather than a barren field choked with thistle and weeds. It sees humanity as God's stewards, tending a world that is *his* and not our own.

When we *embrace God's vision* of the world, we feel the grip of our anxieties lessen, and we are able to trust in the buoyancy of God. When we *trust*, we are able to loosen the grip with which we attempt to control our world. And then we can become stewards rather than tenants. We can return—during this very month of stewardship at St. John's—our first fruits to God.

Before I close, I want to risk a bit of self-disclosure. Several years ago I spent time personally meditating on these topics. I did some rather anguished work looking at how I live in the world, as a tenant using and using up the things around me for my own and my family's benefit, or as a steward of the graces with which God has blessed me. To be honest, I didn't like what I saw. I made a covenant then to work toward both giving more of my time to God and *tithing*—giving 10% of my income back to God through the instruments of the Church and trusting that the

Church will in turn be a faithful steward. I've grown into it. That first year I committed 5% to the Church. The next year I committed 7.5%. Finally, I reached the 10% threshold. It has taken time, and it hasn't been easy from a worldly point of view, but the commitment has been liberating. At times when I have been faced with difficult financial decisions, there has been a great comfort knowing that this first 10% is *God's portion* come what may. All other decisions have been taken on a new perspective. This rule of life has increased my trust in God and, I pray, my capacity to see God's vision for the world.

During this harvest season, as the first fruits of the earth are gathered together, we are invited to consider *all* the abundant blessings we enjoy and to offer thanksgiving to the God who graces us by committing *his* vineyard to *our* care. What thanksgiving means may vary for each of us, but Jesus' question is unavoidable: As we live in God's world, are we tenants, or are we stewards? *Amen.*