

PROPER 22, PENTECOST 19, OCTOBER 8, 2023

A man had worked all of his life, saved all his money, and was a real miser. He told his wife, "When I die, I want you to take all my money and put it in my casket so that I can take it with me in the afterlife." He made her promise on the Bible that she would do exactly that.

He died a few years later and she felt compelled to honor his wishes. When the service in the funeral home was concluded, his wife approached the casket, took a box out of her purse, and placed it next to her husband. Then the casket was closed and taken to the cemetery.

Her best friend, who knew the promise her miser husband exacted from her pulled her aside as they were leaving the funeral home and asked, "You weren't actually fool enough to put all that money in there, were you?" The wife replied, "Listen, I swore on the Bible. I can't go back on my word. I promised him I would put all his money in the casket and I did. I gathered it all up, put into my account, and wrote him a check. If he can cash it, he can spend it."

Possessions! Whether it is money, other things or power, we believe our possessions or wealth defines who we are so much so that we crave to own as much as we can. But in reality those things end up owning us.

The story Jesus offers us today describes a common practice in first century Palestine where an absentee landowner planted a vineyard and leased it out to tenants who cared for it in return for a share in the final crop.

After its pleasant opening, this parable Jesus told goes downhill fast. It is a violent story. Tragedy and heartbreak and human wreckage will always be the end result when people believe that they are the entitled and privileged rather than blessed and loved.

Now, Jesus tells this particular story to accuse the religious leaders of his day for exploiting and mistreating God's people. The parable is meant to expose the corruption of the religious elite and condemn their obsessions with privilege and power. Through the pointed story of the vineyard, Jesus implies that the chief priests and elders are like the wicked tenants. They abuse their authority, dishonor God's house, and mistreat both God's messengers, the Prophets, and God's son Jesus.

The parable is also for us who often refuse to hear God speaking to us today as well especially about our misuse of power, control and authority. It is also about being good stewards. I recently read an article by Debie Thomas an Episcopal priest who uses this parable to talk about how we've treated the environment. She writes, "What the tenants in the story neglect to understand or very deliberately choose to ignore, is that they are stewards rather than owners of the vineyard. When the landowner asks for his rightful share of the harvest, the tenants take offense. They believe the vineyard belongs to them, and it is the landowner who is in the wrong for making a claim on the land at all. Somewhere along the way, the tenants have forgotten their place and their standing in relationship to both the land and the landowner. To put it bluntly, they have forgotten that they own nothing at all. Everything belongs to the landowner. Theirs is not a vocation of ownership; it is a vocation of caring, tending, safeguarding, cultivating, and protecting on behalf of another."

Haven't we, like the tenants in the parable, deluded ourselves into thinking that we "own" the earth and all that is in it, when in fact, we are meant to be stewards only? Haven't we, like the tenants hoarded the beauty and bounty of creation for our own selfish ease, gain, comfort, and convenience?

The truth is we humans crave ownership. We like possessing things and controlling things. We like believing that things exist primarily to please, feed, entertain, soothe, empower, and protect us. The idea that we don't in fact own anything deeply offends us. In many respects stewardship offends us. It insults our core sense of entitlement and threatens our core identity as consumers.

I believe that this stems from a long misunderstanding of the Genesis story where that pesky word dominion comes in where it is translated that humans should have dominion over the animals and all creation. Many Christian scholars have said the Hebrew word for dominion comes from a root word which can mean either to exert control or overpower something, or manage responsibly. The first definition has obviously been used to justify our treatment of the earth and its creatures. But Jewish scholars say the root word comes from another Hebrew word which means to put oneself on the level of someone or something. It's about showing respect. That interpretation makes far better sense. God is not asking us to dominate the creatures God created but to show them respect. Big difference.

God did not give us creation to exert our control and overpower creation but to humble us, to bring us down from our lofty perch and learn a few things about God's beauty, character, love and mercy. God's creation is God's revelation to us. It is not there for us to do with as we please, to abuse it and exert our selfish agendas with it. In fact, if we lower ourselves, show creation respect, creation will speak to us and communicate with us.

You find in most cultures of the world there is a respect for God's creation. Native Americas have a culture that revolves around respecting God's creation. It is really quite simple, you just need to love and respect God's creation and God will speak to us through creation.

October 4th was the feast of St. Francis of Assisi, commemorating the life of a 12th century monk who cared deeply about creation. Last Sunday, many of us had the "Blessing the Animals," recognizing God's care for the creatures that live among us and our need to protect not just them but all of God's creation. In our prayer book Eucharistic Prayer C highlights the concept of "this fragile earth, our island home." When we hoard, exploit, abuse, or ignore the work of God's creative hands, we are rejecting God.

This is not our world. It is God's. This is not our vineyard. It is God's. And unless we exist for others, unless we produce something of goodness beyond ourselves, unless we build our lives upon God we will be no better off than those tenants who refused to share their blessings with God.

When we sing the familiar words, "Praise God from who all blessings flow," we need to remember that we need to "walk the talk" by remembering that what we have is not ours to own but is on loan from God. We need to remember that God's way of grace and love is wooing us to respond to our good fortune of living in God's vineyard by reflecting that love in our actions toward others. And as we care for and exercise

stewardship over God's creation, especially our fellow human beings, we do so as a reflection of God's love.

Our responsibility is to spread a culture of helping, sharing, seeking justice, and safeguarding the environment. Responsibility means thanking God for our gifts and returning to God the fruit of the vineyard that God has blessed us with, Mother Earth. It's not a hard concept to take in. It's really very simple. We must ask ourselves, are we being good stewards and doing everything we can to the best of our ability. Our answer is important because our future hinges on it. Amen.