

Sermon: The Rev. Christopher Bishop
St. Martin's Episcopal Church, Radnor, PA
16 Pentecost, Oct. 2, 2011

Lectionary:

[Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20](#)

[Psalm 19](#)

[Philippians 3:4b-14](#)

[Matthew 21:33-46](#)

I am so excited for us all today! Our children among us... joining our conversation about who we are, really, in relation to God and all the stuff of this world. Partly what I love about the conversation we are entering today, believe it or not, is on account of how much I know we don't like it. Ugh! Stewardship! The church wants my money. My hard earned money that I don't have enough of! And this priest is gonna do a sell-job on how great it is to give to the church! Believe me, I know you guys, cause I've been you. In fact, its worse, I've been the guy in the back pew, when you could even get me into church, arms folded who said, "Uh-uh. I'm on to you. If this is really about God, it *really* oughta be *free*."

And the reason I love it, this conversation, is because I find in life, the bigger the obstacle, the bigger the breakdown on the way to making and keeping commitments that really mean something, the bigger the breakthrough when it occurs. The bigger the possibility of the astonishing Aha! moment, the "Never thought of it like that before!" moment that is always just waiting for us outside our certainties, cynicism, or just plain fatigue. So let's push off from shore and, and if you will, just see what this whole idea of stewardship can *offer* us, rather than take *from* us.

And of course, where we go, is our scripture. I chose to depart from the lectionary this morning for a very particular reason. And that is because, as with so much else in our walk of faith, what we are really up to from God's point of view can sometimes be obscured by our own accumulated view of things. And the source, the theological essence of what stewardship actually is can be found, in part, here, in Deuteronomy. God is telling the Israelites-- freed from the slavery of Egypt, freed from the slavery of, the adoration of, the idolatry of *self*, me, me, me, me, the same freedom we are offered—"If you are serious about this relationship, here's what's so: it's not a one way street. In

response to all that is provided you, and that means everything down to the breath you are taking, in response to your relationship with, me, here is what I require: the first and the best of whatever your take of the bounty of life is. Not the left overs, the *first fruits*.”

This offering of first fruits, for the ancient Israelites and for us, is a sacred act. And these first fruits are unlike anything else we possess, share or do. They are literally a *Sacred Portion* of all that is in our lives. It’s an access into that which is holy. Both in our understanding, and enacting of it. That which we do not, rightly understood, give to God. But rather *return* to God. And this, what we return, we can understand to be sacred! Holy. Special. Set aside. So that precisely you, not God, you can say, before the Lord: ‘I have removed the sacred portion from the house, and I have given it to the Levites, the resident aliens, the orphans, and the widows, in accordance with your entire commandment that you commanded me.’ And why? So that they “may eat their fill within your towns.”

Stewardship is not, at its core, about money. It’s about something much bigger. It’s about us and our relatedness to God and the Kingdom of God and the whole of blessed creation, which is all God’s, all the time and in every way. And if we have any confusion about that, just ask yourself, “Where will my car, my house, my dog, my jewelry, my everything, *me* be in 1,000 years? It’s all God’s, the Eternal One, the Ancient of Days.

And, you may wonder, gee, how does this actually work? Well, this part right here, about taking care of the orphans, and widows that they “may eat their fill within your towns”? It’s happening right here, right now in this parish. We were sitting in our Parish Life meeting two nights ago, and we’re sort of struggling over this Fall fundraiser. Jazz, casino night, poetry, music—and for a while its all about how we gonna raise \$4-5,000 cause its in our budget. And it’s just no fun. No excitement. Not inspiring. And the thought came up, “Hey, what if we make it about something other than our selves?” Where is there a need, *out there*, in God’s world that we can do something about? Suddenly, Myrtie Musetti’s talking about how the food banks around here desperately need food.

Suddenly Pattie Booker is talking about that there are 4 kids living without homes, without security, without families able to take care of them right here in Radnor.

Let's create a fundraiser about feeding people till they eat their fill in our towns and let's take care of the orphans. And suddenly that room changed.

And why? Because we got out of our conversations in our heads about ourselves and got into God's world where God's people and their lives are. *That's stewardship.* Taking care of, being responsible for how things go in this world through who we are being and what we are willing to commit to. What we, of ourselves, are willing to give. And so we chose to create an evening in the church of music and poetry and God knows what else to raise some real money for those hungry people and those kids. And how will this come about? It will come about from people giving their time—stewardship—giving their talent—stewardship—giving their treasure—at the event and before the event in making this church's existence and the web of relationships around it possible—stewardship.

And we have to get that if we are just thinking about giving up money, or our precious time, better spent elsewhere, we really are missing the whole point. The whole access to the sacred that we seek. The whole great glorious show of who we can be in this world through honoring our relationship with the Creator who gave us everything in the first place and makes one request in return: Honor this relationship with all you are and with all you have. And the reason is that because if we do, we get to be great as the living children of the living God. We get to be bigger than our fears and worries-- more loving, more peaceful, more happy, more fulfilled, more inspired, just as that Parish Life group was after a simple but significant shift: Let's let it be not about us, but about God and being responsible for God's world. Its powerful, and not theoretical or imagined power, but *instrumental* power to create goodness and healing and wonder around us. Because we are powerfully in relationship to the world as one of God's own, as the mouth, hands and feet of God—the very body of Christ.

This “making it about God and not ourselves” dynamic, at the core of stewardship and virtually all of our teachings about right relationship, is ultimately what God and Moses and all the prophets keep harping about, it's what Jesus keeps teaching about, and it's what our parable today is about. In parables, typically but not always, masters, landowners or judges represent God; workers, tenants, farmers or guests, us; and vineyards are often both the earthly world and God's kingdom. So in this story a

landowner, perhaps God, sends proxies to collect rent from some tenants, us, working his vineyard, the world. So they seize and beat them, even kill them.

Isn't this response really about the tenants saying: "What? Who? Me? Give something back? Why? It's mine! It's free! Right?" And as parables often do, we are invited to see ourselves in the various characters: landowner, slaves or proxies, tenants, even the son—in this case probably Jesus. And while it may be tempting to say *we* would never act like that, we pay our rent, our bills, our way, so to speak, maybe we can dig a little deeper. Don't we say to ourselves, "What's mine belongs to me and me alone? I earned it. I made it. I fought for it. Don't we think we own our very lives, our property, even our opportunities? But our question must always be, "What is the real source?" At bottom, who gave us the life in which all of these things become possible? Who gave us the wombs that conceived us, the minds to apply to our lives, the hearts to fall in love with those most precious to us? If we're honest and tease it out and tease it out and tease it out to its essence—there is only one source. And that is God.

Now recall, Jesus is talking to the Pharisees. And when they ask him the question, well, what is to happen to the wicked, murderous tenants, notice he doesn't answer the question. He doesn't say, "They're all going to be cast out into the outer darkness"—a common formulation for the punishment worse than death in Matthew. Instead he rebukes the Pharisees for answering in this way and merely speaks of himself. As the stone that the builders rejected, he is the foundation of the Kingdom of God. So, my friends, here's the "So what?" If we allow the Holy Spirit to search our hearts, and we can recognize to our core that all we have, and all we are comes from God, then the sharing of that which is precious to us, our time, talent and treasure simply becomes a natural and sweet and blessed response, a sacred response, to the gift of God's love in Christ.

As you know by now, we are calling this season of stewardship beginning next week "Sacred Portion." The idea that what we return to God, gifts of all kinds that really cost us something, mean something, ask something of us, are holy. And I couldn't stop thinking about this kid, Cory. My friend Jamie is a pediatric nurse in an oncology unit. She told me about how this little boy, Cory, 9 years old, called her into his room, sometime in October, and asked her to close the door. And he was a smiley little kid, even

given his terminal lymphoma, but he grew very serious. And said to her, “Jamie, I know you’d never lie to me. Am I gonna die before Christmas?” And she said “Yeah. That’s what’s gonna happen, Cory.” And he didn’t miss a beat. He said, “Ok. I’ve been thinking. I have this Make a Wish money that I was gonna buy stuff for myself for Christmas. I want to use it now to buy presents for the other kids here who are gonna be dead then.”

And he did. He bought Playstations, and video games. I guess one little girl was nuts about Beauty Queen Barbie or something. He got her one. About a month later he was dead. But those kids had those toys for Christmas. Now to me, that is a sacred, sacred portion, from a little boy directly into the heart of God. Most of us aren’t 9 years old dealing with such things. But we are dealing with a lot. I know. So let us go forward in these coming weeks, and really be in this conversation together. About what of ourselves, of who we are, we are willing to return for God’s use among His people, in service to His beautiful and hurting world.

In Jesus’ name, and through the Holy Spirit of the One God who favors all children, of all ages, even unto the end of time, Amen.