

**The Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost**  
**October 7-8, 2017**  
**Matthew 21:33-46**

*Consecrated Stewards: Owners or Tenants?*

I spent this past week in Iowa visiting my mother and family members. October in that part of the country means it's harvest time. Crops like soybeans and corn are being harvested from farm fields and brought in to market. There can be traffic back-ups there as well, but a different kind than what we're used to as you navigate the road with massive combines, tractors, and wagons. It's harvest time here where we live also as the fruits of the earth are brought in from gardens, orchards, and fields. This is the season to go apple picking, something that gets us out into the rolling Virginia countryside, always beautiful but especially so in the fall. All of this serves as backdrop to the words of Jesus in today's Gospel lesson as He tells the parable of the tenants in the vineyard (Matthew 21:33-46). It's harvest time in that parable as the vineyard owner seeks to get his rightful share of the fruit from the harvest. There is a term for this arrangement that is still widely used today, which is crop sharing. The owner of the land rents out his or her property to tenants who then pay the owner an agreed-upon amount of rent which is a percentage of the crops or produce from the harvest. But in the parable which Jesus tells, the tenants come to think and act like they're the owners rather than the tenants. That's where the problems begin, and it escalates into a terrible situation. This becomes the theme for preaching today under the theme: "Consecrated Stewards: Owners or Tenants?" May the Lord's rich and abundant blessing rest upon the preaching, the hearing, and the living of his Word for Jesus' sake.

This is week #2 in our 4-part Consecrated Stewards series in this month of October. Each week, we are looking at parables which Jesus told, all of which underscore what it means to live as the Lord's consecrated stewards in daily life. Last week, we heard another parable about vineyards which Jesus told: the man who had two sons and said to both of them to go and work in the vineyard (Matthew 21:23-32). One son said he wouldn't, but then did, while the other said he would, but did not. Our calling as God's consecrated stewards is to not say one thing and do another, but that our words translate into action for the kingdom of God. Today we're hearing about Jesus' parable of the tenants in the vineyard. Next weekend (Oct 14-15), we'll hear about Jesus parable of the wedding feast and all the excuses people came up with for not going (Matthew 22:1-14). And then for Consecration Sunday (Oct 21-22), we hear Jesus' teaching on "rendering to God the things that are God's" (Matthew 22:15-22). From all of these words of Jesus, the truth hits us between the eyes: God is the Maker and Owner of heaven and earth! God is the owner of the vineyard, and we are just the tenants. That is principle #1 in Christian stewardship: **"The earth is the Lord's, and the fullness thereof, the world and those who dwell therein"** (Psalm 24:1). The truth that comes to us from God's Word is that though we may talk about owning things – my house, my car, my life – we really don't *own* anything. Everything we have is on loan to us from a gracious and loving God. All of these things that have been placed into our hands – including our very lives – belong to the Lord. Now, how will we manage and care for these things that are the Lord's?

Today's Old Testament lesson (Isaiah 5:1-7) and Psalm (Psalm 80:7-19) speak of Israel as the Lord's chosen vineyard. He plucked up that struggling vine and brought it out of Egypt. He planted it in the vineyard of the Promised Land. He tended and nurtured it, but it was yielding wild grapes, not cultivated ones. Lest there be any doubt, Isaiah clearly says: **"For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel"** (Isaiah 5:7a). For the gardener, the orchard owner, the farmer, it is immensely frustrating to plant something, carefully watching over it, only to have it produce spindly, half-formed, bitter fruit that is not good. If this is true with people, how much more true is this with the Lord! So, when Jesus tells his parable in today's Gospel lesson, the chief priests and Pharisees would have immediately thought of this passage from Isaiah, and it would have hit home. Those are very convicting words: **"Therefore I say to you, the kingdom of God will be taken from you and given to a nation bearing the fruits of it"**

(Matthew 21:43). That is a wake-up call for all of us! The Lord is looking for fruit from what He has planted in the lives of his people. An apple tree will produce apples. A grape vine will produce grapes. That is what apples trees and grape vines do. We who have been baptized into Christ's death and resurrection, who are called by his Name and know his grace and mercy, will by the power of the Holy Spirit produce fruit in our lives, but a different kind of fruit. Isaiah tells us in the closing verse from today's Old Testament lesson what some of those fruits are: justice and righteousness (Isaiah 5:7). It is the fruits of the Spirit that God is looking for in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control (Galatians 5:22-23). These are things which cannot be forced, but which can be cultivated. No one can force an apple tree to produce apples or a grape vine to produce grapes. But what we can do is to provide the right growing conditions in which this can happen. One thing is for certain: plants will generally do better if you water, fertilize, and weed them than if you don't. These are right growing conditions. And so it is with us, as God's beloved children. We cannot force these fruits of the Spirit to happen in our lives, but if we expose ourselves to the right growing conditions there is a much better opportunity for this to happen. Those right growing conditions include things like gathering with God's people for worship regularly; being in God's Word so that we can be shaped and formed by it; coming before the Lord in prayer; receiving Jesus as He comes to us in his Holy Supper. These are those right growing conditions that produce fruits of faith which are well-pleasing to the Lord and bless our neighbor.

Like any gardener, farmer, or vineyard owner, the Lord, has an investment in what He has planted. But the Lord's investment in what He has planted in you and me goes way beyond just dollars and cents. The Lord has invested the life of his beloved Son, Jesus Christ, in us! It is Jesus who is the **“stone that the builders rejected [and] has become the cornerstone”** (Matthew 21:42; Psalm 118:22). In him, we are **“like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ”** (1 Peter 2:5). Jesus is that beloved Son of the vineyard Owner in the parable. He was sent into that greedy and hate-filled vineyard. He was killed by people who saw themselves as owners rather than tenants. Though we were not physically present to kill Jesus, we did most assuredly participate in crucifying him. It was our greed, our twisted thinking that we were owners rather than tenants, our sins, that nailed Jesus to the cross. All this Jesus, the Son of God, willingly endured in order to redeem and restore us to a right relationship with our heavenly Father. This right relationship leads to a right understanding of the truth that God is the Maker and Owner of heaven and earth; we are just the tenants, the managers, the stewards, of what belongs to God. Ourselves, our time, our possessions are not our own, but come as gifts from our gracious God. How will we make use of these to honor the Lord and be a blessing to others? This is the question before us as God's consecrated stewards.

This is all about Mission Practice #4 as we join Jesus on his mission and do good to others in his Name. The terrible shooting massacre in Las Vegas last week reminds us that as God's consecrated stewards we live in a broken world that is shattered by sin and its consequences. The “why” behind this is still unanswered. In the midst of so many things that we cannot control and so many things that we cannot understand, we hold fast to this truth: life is a sacred gift from God, our Maker and Redeemer. Life is uncertain at best, so while there is time, let us do good in the Name of Jesus, who loves and shed his blood for us that we may be his own. The sermon has been preached; it now remains to be lived in each of our lives. God help us to lives as his consecrated stewards for Jesus' sake. Amen.