

**St. Andrew's Cathedral**  
Jackson, Mississippi  
Sermon for October 8, 2017 ~ Proper 22A  
The Very Reverend Ronald D. Pogue

We gather today in the aftermath of several traumatic events that have rocked our nation. Those events, the result of both natural evil and human evil, have frightened us, evoked compassion and sorrow, frustrated us, and angered us. Within this range of emotions, we find ourselves asking where is God and when will God's kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven. Perhaps it is helpful that these events come at the time of year when the theme of the gospel readings concerns the reign of God. In the parables of the Kingdom, Jesus tells his audience that life with God is the greatest treasure and cautions the most religious of us not to get too comfortable. Today's parable of the Wicked Tenants is just one example.

Jesus told this parable in order to give the religious leaders in his audience a jolt. It is a sharp, even harsh rebuke of the quality of life he found among those who were supposed to be the best examples of what life is like when lived in communion with God. Here, as in other places, Jesus uses an agricultural theme to make his point. Jesus' finishes the parable with the question, "When the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?"

Of course, they knew the "right" answer: "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." At this point, Jesus turned the tables and said, "The kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom." Matthew says the crowd regarded Jesus as a prophet. They wanted to call the Commission on Ministry and say, "Let's ordain him!" But the members of the Commission on Ministry were there and clearly offended. They wanted to arrest him, but were afraid to do so because the crowd might have turned on them.

Like the Ten Commandments, the Parable of the Wicked Tenants is set over against the community of God's people as a standard against which to measure the quality and fruitfulness of our corporate life. The Church is not a business venture, a moneymaking or fund-raising group, an activity for Sunday mornings, a program for social welfare, or even a ministry. The Church is the Body of Christ, a gathering of believers amongst whom Jesus Christ is central and the reason for meeting.

It is what St. Paul had in mind when he wrote about wanting to "know Christ" as the supreme value that is more important than anything else in life. He calls the experience "life in Christ." It is reflected in the prayer we often pray, when we say that we are, "Living members of the Body of your Son, and heirs of your eternal kingdom."

God has expectations of those to whom eternal life has been given and accountability is built right in. Notice in today's parable that everything necessary for fruitfulness was provided: the landowner planted the vines, cultivated the vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a wine press, and even built a watchtower. All the tenants had to do was manage and tend the vineyard so that it would produce fruit, then return some of it to the owner. They were stewards of what had been provided by the owner of the vineyard.

I have often wondered how the notion that stewardship is about saving ever entered the Church. Read the Bible. Stewardship is never about saving. It is always about seeds, sowing, planting, tending, watering, harvesting, and investing. Christian stewardship is about investing what God has entrusted to

us in what matters to God for the good of the world. When Jesus says, “I am the vine, you are the branches. Apart from me you can do nothing,” he is speaking of the effects of being a “living member.” The fruit of that relationship should be evident, recognizable, and bountiful. What is that fruit? In his letter to the Galatians, St. Paul provides a nine-point list of Christ-like attributes known as “The fruit of the Spirit” – love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

That is the fruit God desires from our life together, when we gather and when we are apart. We are not the owners of this vineyard. We don’t have to worry about our inheritance because we have already been incorporated into the life of the Son of God and given a full share in his inheritance. We are the tenants, and we know that we already have a vested interest. We are the stewards of everything God has placed in our hands. We come here week after week to celebrate our life in Christ and to provoke one another to be about those things that produce fruit – ripe, delicious, nutritious, bountiful, life-giving fruit.

We are not the owners of God’s bounty but the creatures God has appointed as stewards of it. Tithing and proportional giving are spiritual practices that acknowledge and remind us that everything we have, spent, saved, or given away, is a sacred trust from God. We are the only creatures entrusted with that knowledge. What a blessing! What liberating knowledge that is! What a contrast to those tenants who were consumed by their desire to possess and profit from a vineyard that was not even theirs. That desire drove them to commit murder.

Christian community is supposed to stand in contrast to those tenants in the parable. The community we share matters to me, to you, and to the message of God’s kingdom. That’s why we come together and engage in ministries to each other and to the world at our doorstep. Each member of the community is responsible for sustaining the life of the community by practicing the spiritual discipline of stewardship. The Vestry told me we had work to do in this area. My own study of the giving patterns of our members confirms their assessment. And, I’ve been told that some members are under the impression that the Cathedral doesn’t need their gifts.

The problem with that is threefold. Firstly, it misses the point of financial stewardship by assuming that it’s about the Church’s need to receive. Secondly, it assumes that it is up to those who are in a position to give large amounts to cover the costs. Thirdly, it views the Church as just another non-profit. While non-profits rely on fund raising as the primary way to fund their mission, the Church must rely primarily on its members to practice the spiritual discipline of Christian stewardship. It is as central to our way of honoring God as our prayers. There is nothing wrong with fund raising and we will need to do some of that from time to time. But in the Church, fund raising is not an appropriate foundation for the spiritual lives of its members or for the pursuit of God’s mission. God is the Supreme Giver and we who understand ourselves to be created in God’s likeness are destined to give in a godlike way. Givers need to give and for Christians giving to God is a spiritual matter.

This stewardship emphasis is not about the Church’s need to receive but about the giver’s need to give. Of course the Church benefits. But that is the result of the stewardship of its members. Jesus said, “Seek first the Kingdom of God and its righteousness and all these things will be added” (Matthew 6:33). We are to put our own spiritual health first and trust that the work of the Church will be among “all these things” that will benefit. But if we started with trying to impress upon you how your gifts meet the needs of the Church, that would be fund raising, not Christian stewardship.

So, one of the most important and precious responsibilities I have as a Priest is to help those given into my care to have a healthy relationship with their possessions. It is both my duty and my joy to speak

with you directly about how you steward the treasure God has entrusted to you. And, as a start, I recommend tithing. Gay and I decided long ago that we would tithe – that is, give 10% of our household income to God through God’s Church, which we believe is God’s primary instrument in the world. Our parents practiced tithing, so it was already a part of our life when we married. We decided that if we couldn’t live on the 90% that remained after we give 10% to God, we were living beyond our means. We realized that we couldn’t just start tithing all at once. Because we had commitments that had to be fulfilled, we decided to start with 2% and work our way up. We hardly noticed that 2%, so we modified our plan and gave more. We knew the amount needed to be enough to make us mindful of how we steward the rest. From time to time unexpected events and setbacks have resulted in our giving less than a tithe. But we have remained committed to tithing and, with God’s help, we always work our way back.

I invite you to join us in this spiritual practice of tithing. It’s sort of like a physical discipline where you work up to the level at which you are in peak condition. Start wherever you can, 1%, 2%, 5%, and move up a step or two each year until you are able to tithe. And, when you get there, don’t let it lead you to feel smug and self-righteous. Instead, let it make you mindful of God’s generosity and the joy of being a faithful, generous steward of everything entrusted to you.

In truth, the giving patterns here are about the same as the average for The Episcopal Church. But, I wasn’t called here to challenge and inspire you to be average. God has given you everything you need to excel in generosity!

By the time you call your new dean, there should be evidence everywhere that you are a people of “glad and generous hearts” who practice extravagant generosity. If there is one thing that needs to be resolved during this time of transition, it is the matter of money and it has to be dealt with at the spiritual level by every member. So, I invite you today to make your pledge of faithful and generous stewardship as an act of spiritual devotion to God and God’s mission through the Cathedral of St. Andrew. Our prayers, our service, our actions, and our gifts will be expressions of the reign of God on earth.