

10.8.2023 Time after Pentecost, 19

Pastor Timothy McKenzie

Isaiah 5:1-7, 25-32; Psalm 80:7-15; Philippians 3:4b-14; Matthew 21:33-46

“Stewards of grace”

*Grace to you, and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.*

October is the season for St. Mark’s annual stewardship appeal. This year’s stewardship theme, “*One in Christ Jesus*,” comes from Galatians (3:27-28) which centers on our unity in Christ through Holy Baptism. In baptism, God clothes a diverse humanity in the grace and forgiveness of Christ, making us “*one in Christ Jesus*.” One in Christ, we become “stewards of grace,” coworkers in God’s vineyard of this world.

The word “stewardship” is about caring for the economy of God’s house. Indeed, the root of the word “economy” (*oikonomia*), comes from the Greek word *oikos*, meaning “house.” In the New Testament, *oikonomia* is economic management of God’s household. As stewards of grace today’s gospel helps us live into our stewardship of God’s house here at St. Mark’s. Like the tenants in the parable, we are to care for this church and its ministry, but we are not the owners, St. Mark’s belongs to God.

In today’s gospel, Jesus says there was a landowner who planted a vineyard, built a winepress, and leased it to tenants, and then went away to another country. The word translated as “landowner” (*oikodespotes*) literally means “the lord of the household.” To understand this parable is to see that lord of the household, the landowner, lent the vineyard out to tenants who were to be stewards within the economics, or *oikonomia*, of the lord’s household. It is not difficult to see why Jesus stresses the sheer hubris and sinfulness of tenants who rebelled, seeking to rob the vineyard from its rightful owner. The similarities with the Genesis account of the first humans in Eden are striking, and Jesus makes it clear that since that time, human beings have continued to rebel against God, who has placed trust in them as stewards of God’s grace.

For the past month, the gospel texts have all been about the economics, the *oikonomia*, of God’s household. We have heard the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant (Mt. 18:21-35); the Parable of God calling workers to the Vineyard (Mt. 20:1-16); and the Parable of Two Sons (Mt. 21:23-32). In each of these texts, Jesus’ message is challenging because, unlike the world, the economy of God’s kingdom is about justice and forgiveness, inclusion and grace, self-denial and service for others. Jesus tells these parables to challenge the economics of our world that often views profit as the end goal, rewarding those who are the strongest, and those who take rather

than give. The promise of judgement at the end of today's parable is a solemn reminder that even a loving, patient, and forgiving God will not reward those who mistreat and abuse others in the economics of this world. Jesus' parables about the kingdom function as social criticism of human societies and systems that place value upon material things before human beings and human institutions before God's kingdom of grace.

In today's reading from Philippians, Paul uses himself as an example of his zealousness as a Pharisee. Paul had advanced to the elite of Judaism, telling us that as to zeal, no one surpassed him. Yet rather than using the gift of God's grace, laboring for God and others, Paul tells us that he had used his position to persecute the church. In other words, like today's parable, Paul was a living example of one who sought to kill the Son and usurp power over the grace of God's covenant with Israel, attempting to control the inheritance of the vineyard.

Paul's own encounter with the risen Christ on the road to Damascus was so profound that he came to view all his past achievements as worthless. Paul abandoned his old self as a Pharisee, writing that he wanted "*to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in death.*" Grace freed Paul from his past to change his mind and live into God's unfolding plan and future in Jesus Christ.

Paul's language of "*forgetting what lies behind*" and pressing on toward the goal describes the Christian life. Like Paul, we do not glory in our accomplishments or live in the past, but grasped by the power of Christ's resurrection, we press on into the future because Christ has made us his own.

Stewardship is about managing the gifts of grace now and pressing on into God's future together. As stewards of grace, we do not rest on our laurels, thinking about the glory days of the past; rather, we are always pressing on to discover and participate in God's unfolding plan for this world. This future is hidden from us, yet we are given the opportunity to envision this future with one and other for Christ. This is our work as a church: to envision God's future together.

The parable of the vineyard describes God's trust and patience with humanity. When things don't go well, God is also patient with us. If we understand this parable as a story about God's love and human rebellion, we can also see Paul's story and as well as our own in the parable. God continues to give humanity grace to do his work during our lifetimes.

How do you see yourself in this parable? How are you using the grace and the time that God has given to you? Do you live in the past, or do you press forward toward the goal of knowing

Christ's resurrection, suffering with him and living for others?

Stewardship is, of course, about the economic management of God's household, but it is also about how we use our financial resources across time, across our lifetimes. The *oikonomia* – the economics – of God's household involve the entire span of our lives.

This year's Stewardship Appeal, "*One in Christ Jesus*," is a sign of our work together. St. Mark's is a congregation with a storied and blessed past, yet we must also continue to press forward to the goal of knowing Christ today and tomorrow. We do this sharing in Christ's sufferings for others in this world so that others might also know Christ alive for them.

As a church, we work together, sharing in the grace of God, suffering together in service to others, and envisioning the future. We do this by, "*forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead*," so that we and others might know Christ and the power of his resurrection.

This parable helps us see that stewardship season is also about time in the largest sense: it is about eschatological time. How do you view the brief span of your lifetime within God's time of eternity? How do you use your time and resources for Christ at St. Mark's and across your lifetime? At the end of our lives our stewardship of God's grace will live on as a foundation for future generations. Like generations before us, our stewardship today builds a foundation for future generations whom we will never know. Our work together for Christ builds a foundation upon which others to come will know Christ and the power of his resurrection.

During October, take time to envision God's work at St. Mark's: what are new and creative ways we can continue to make partnerships, continue to welcome others, continue to serve the least in our community, and continue to creatively use our building and land for the goal of God's heavenly call?

I invite you to use the month of October to prayerfully consider your stewardship of God's grace in the *oikonomia*, the economy, of God's household at St. Mark's.

We are made "*One in Christ Jesus*." We are stewards of God's grace. Amen.