

Stephen Shaver
Episcopal Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa, CA
October 4, 2020
Year A, Proper 22, Revised Common Lectionary, Track 2
[Isaiah 5:1-7](#)
[Psalm 80:7-14](#)
[Philippians 3:4b-14](#)
[Matthew 21:33-46](#)

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This is a sermon about stewardship—and by that I don't mean a sermon about our fall pledge campaign. That's coming and there will be time to talk about that soon. But the word "stewardship" in church too often gets used as just a fancy word for giving money when really stewardship is something so much bigger. Stewardship means taking care of something that's not yours, that someone else has entrusted to you. Being a good steward is taking care of something on behalf of its real owner.

Jesus tells lots of parables about stewardship: about servants charged with taking care of sums of money while their lord is away. About a good shepherd who cares well for the sheep and a hired hand who doesn't. And this parable, about tenants charged with caring for the vineyard and instead treating it as their own. And this idea of stewardship is woven all through the Bible. In the very beginning of the story of scripture, human beings are created to be stewards of the planet. God charges them to tend the ground and care for the plants and animals on God's behalf.

So for us as a species, there's a constant question: how will we treat what's been entrusted to us? Will we treat it with care, using our best wisdom and skill to help it flourish, using it well for our own needs while always keeping in mind that it belongs to someone else? Or not?

Think about the stereotypical vacation cabin after a party weekend, trashed and full of beer cans. Or the stereotypical rental car that gets driven into the ground. Being a bad steward means on the one hand treating the thing like it belongs to you, because after all, you get to do what you want with it. But it also means treating it like it *doesn't* belong to you, because after all, it's not your responsibility and you get to walk away from it. It's that special mixture of entitlement and irresponsibility that makes for really bad stewardship.

It's all too easy to see how we as human beings have demonstrated that kind of bad stewardship all around us today. We have just finished a devastating week of wildfires, fires that continue to burn, fires that have claimed homes among our own members and many of our neighbors. And while fires have always been part of the

ecosystem here in California we in this region are all too conscious of just how that ecosystem has shifted over the past several years as a direct result of climate change, climate change we as a species have created, and we through our leaders have failed to act upon, treating the world in one sense as if it belongs to us to pollute any way we choose, and in another sense as if it's not ours to take care of and we can hand it back to a rental agency instead of bequeathing it to our children and grandchildren.

We've seen a lack of stewardship in our society's response to the COVID-19 pandemic, where leaders have put partisan posturing that can boost political careers above good science that protects the common good, making basic public health precautions like masks and distancing into partisan badges and treating them as things that those in power can flagrantly disregard even while telling the rest of the country to obey them. And we've seen that same lack of stewardship when our leaders undermine democratic governance and even normalize outright bigotry and violence.

It's not hard from where we stand to see all the ways we are not tending the garden the way we were created to do.

Now that is not something new. It's something that human beings, and especially those in leadership, have been doing since the very beginning. After all the story of Genesis goes on to tell just how those prototypical first human beings failed to be good stewards of their Garden. And through the generations there have been good leaders and good stewards to be sure, but just as often there have been those with power who have chosen to use that power to benefit themselves.

The Gospel of Matthew says explicitly that Jesus tells today's parable to the chief priests and the elders of the people—in other words, to leaders, people in power who are meant to be stewards of God's people, Israel, on God's behalf. And the parable he tells is very explicitly crafted as a takeoff on an older one from the prophet Isaiah, that imagines the people of Israel as God's vineyard. It even includes identical details like the landowner digging a wine press and building a watchtower to make sure his listeners don't miss the reference. Our Psalm from today plays on the exact same theme. This was embedded deeply in the consciousness of Jesus' hearers. And Jesus' version of this story isn't particularly subtle. While there's always more than one way to read a parable, it seems pretty clear at least from the way Matthew's gospel narrator frames it that the tenants in the story are meant to reflect these rulers and leaders, these people in power.

That's worth naming specifically because Christians over the years have often read this parable in a different way, interpreting the tenants as the people of Israel in general and suggesting that God takes the kingdom away from the chosen people, the Jews, and gives it to the Gentile Christians instead. That interpretation has fed

centuries of anti-Semitism, to the church's eternal shame. And it's just not a good interpretation. The background from Isaiah makes it clear that Israel is the vineyard and that the ones God is judging are those who fail to care for the chosen people as stewards.

It's interesting also that in Matthew's version of this parable, Jesus leaves the story unfinished. He actually ends with a question: what do *you* think the landowner will do to these tenants? And in their very answer—he will come and kill them—maybe we see the mindset of these particular leaders, people of violence who can only imagine a violent retribution.

Where's the good news for us in this parable today? In the middle of overlapping crises, I still think there is some. For one thing, it might tell us that God's judgment on bad stewardship is real. It really does matter how we take care of the vineyard. It's not just a rental we can trash. The landowner cares and God is still in charge. That's a stern kind of good news, that may not feel like good news to the tenants, but is very good news for God's beloved vines which will not be abused forever. There's even good news for the tenants if we look deep enough. We might have to go outside this particular parable to find it. Because this is a parable of judgment, a parable told in the last week of Jesus' life in the shadow of the cross, a parable that points to Holy Week. It's a pre-Easter parable. And to get the full story we need to read it in the light of Easter. In the light of a reality where the beloved Son who gets killed doesn't stay dead, and brings the murdered servants back from the grave with him; where his infinite judgment is coupled with infinite mercy; and where even the wicked tenants are invited to turn around, to roll up their sleeves and learn what it means to serve others, to cooperate with God in a vineyard partnership that produces abundantly for all.