

Free to serve: Philippians 3:4b-14; Matthew 21:33-46

We need to repent of offering the world our charitable leftovers and then pouting when the world doesn't say thank you.

by [Mary W. Anderson](#) in the [September 23, 2008](#) issue

This parable in Matthew is a sister to the song of the vineyard in Isaiah 5. In both cases, God is the farmer who has provided generously so that the vineyard will be very fruitful. In Isaiah, the distress is over a lack of good fruit despite fine care of the vineyards. In Jesus' story, the fruit is good, but the trusted stewards are corrupt and self-serving. They are terrible tenants who have come between the owner and the good produce he desires to harvest. When the owner sends his slaves to collect the produce, the tenants beat them and even kill one of them; when he sends his son, they kill him as well. Unlike the vineyard in Isaiah, however, this vineyard is not destroyed as a consequence; the healthy vineyard in Matthew is given over to new management.

The Bible provides one witness after another that God's mission to save the world will not be derailed by human wickedness, doubt or failure. God's kingdom is not built on human institutions or promises, but is built and planted in God's grace-filled will to make it happen. As Paul proclaims to the Philippians, he brings no rights and privileges to God's mission because he has no righteousness of his own. The violent tenants, by contrast, are tending the vines, but as they work they are plotting how to turn stewardship into ownership.

As members and pastors of congregations that encourage each other in faithful stewardship each autumn, we are challenged by this idea that we are stewards of much and owners of nothing. Like the tenants, we are enchanted by this rent-to-own world. We have made it if we work for ourselves or have a mortgage rather than a lease. These are signs of strength in a world that beams its favor on the strong.

Because we have been trained up in the world's values, the life of a steward isn't a life we value. In Christian kindness, we might refrain from speaking ill of a member of the "least of these," but we sure don't want to be in with them. Yet when we were baptized, we were made workers in the kingdom of God. Everything else falls away as loss except for our stewardship in this vineyard.

What is scripturally clear is that with this stewardship comes the great responsibility of tending this vineyard. As Paul says to another congregation, "This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God" (1 Cor. 4:1). Stewardship in a vineyard means being entrusted with the responsibility to tend the vines so well that they produce an abundance of good fruit. It means using the owner's resources economically and wisely. For all the beautiful metaphors and poetry we might put to it, stewardship remains difficult for us because in our heart of hearts we still want to be the owners, the independent shot-callers. Even if we aren't violent tenants, we are reluctant ones. The warning in the parable, this call to repentance, is that the vineyard, the kingdom, needs faithful stewards. If the present lot is unfaithful in its responsibilities, others will be called to work. It's as simple as that.

To be faithful stewards in the kingdom of God, we must stop dreaming of ownership and stop plotting violent takeovers. We need to be honest about our deeply held preferences for ownership over servanthship. We must repent of offering the world our charitable leftovers and of pouting when the world doesn't say thank you.

A pastor said he had recently learned that there was a cultural trend among some members of the congregation. Apparently those who were singing in the choir thought that their choral commitment replaced any call to make financial contributions to the church. Imagine if everyone who contributed of his or her time and talent stopped contributing treasure! There is something in this trend that smacks of plotting ownership.

Here in the South, we live either in ongoing silence or on-going conversation about racial reconciliation. Some of us fervently believe that healing is still needed in our nation and that the gospel calls us to be active stewards in this healing. This is the tending of the vineyard we are called to do because the fruit of reconciliation is not yet ripe and the weeds and thorns are many. Others deny that there is any work left for the present generation to do; they believe that any problems are just imaginary and any wounds self-inflicted. The failure of this second group of people to take

stewardship seriously is a violent plotting against the God who planted and cares for this kingdom.

God has also taken on the burdens that come with ownership. God has the ultimate responsibility for repairing, saving and guiding this worldly vineyard. The cross confirms this divine responsibility and sets us free to serve in a world with the calls and gifts that Christ gives us in abundance. Meanwhile, of course, the world will continue to sing of the glories of ownership, of the power of independence and of the violent ways we can make it all ours.

As for me, home ownership is enough of a burden. Thanks be to God who owns the world and burdens me only with the blessing of my call to tend a few vines and pull a thorn or two.