

My work in God's garden (Matthew 21:33-46)

I enjoy the tomatoes I grow, but they aren't really mine.

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I do not know what it is to tend a vineyard, but I do know what it is to keep a garden. For years now, every spring we turn over the soil in our little patch in the yard behind the house. We mend the fence, add some fertilizer, and plant the seeds and the starts. It is so satisfying. Rich black soil, nice straight rows, not a weed in sight. There is nothing like a freshly planted garden to make you feel that all is right in the world.

But then the work really begins. It is one thing to plant a garden. It is another thing to tend to it week after week. The tender shoots must be watered regularly. Weed after incessant weed must be pulled. Leggy tomato plants need to be staked and tied up. Suckers need to be pinched off. Having a garden, even a small one like we have, requires a lot of hard, dirty, sweaty, mosquito-bitten work.

But it is so worth it when the tomatoes start coming in. A homegrown tomato is a thing of beauty, with a flavor that cannot be beat. Sometimes, if we are feeling exceedingly generous, we may share a tomato with a neighbor or two, but mostly we keep them for ourselves. After working so hard, it is particularly satisfying to enjoy the rewards, the fruits of our labor.

So I am not sure how I would react if at the moment of the harvest, someone turned up with an empty bushel basket ready to take a sizable portion of my bounty away.

Being a polite midwesterner at heart, I am sure I would not beat them up, throw them out, or have them killed. But I would be pretty resentful and angry about it. I worked hard for those tomatoes. They are mine.

This is how my garden patch and I tend to work. But it turns out that this is not how we are to work as we tend to the Kingdom of God.

When I was in seminary, a professor interrupted me mid-sentence one day in class. It was a UCC polity class, and I believe we were discussing how we each understood our calls to ministry. It was my turn to speak, and I started out saying “I understand that my ministry is to be....” when my professor suddenly jumped in.

“Remember” he said to me and to the rest of the class, “it is not *your* ministry. It will never be *your* ministry. The point that it becomes *your* ministry is the point when it is ministry no longer. It is the ministry that *God* is doing in and through you.”

I have found his words to be helpful as I walk this path of ministry, tending to the garden, struggling with the weeds, and delighting in the fruit. When things are going well and I feel that “me and mine” voice begin to rise in me, I remind myself to stop and give thanks to God for the ministry that God is doing in and through me. God is the Lord of the harvest. I am free to enjoy a tomato or two along the way, but the fruit of the harvest is and will always be God’s.