

**STEWARDS OF ALL, OWNERS OF NOTHING (MT 21:33-46)**

Sermon given by the Rev. Corinne Hodges  
Sunday, October 5, 2008, St. John of the Cross

*The following serves as a reflection on the gospel reading  
and on stewardship as we kick off Stewardship Month at SJOC.*

Today's gospel is a disturbing reading. There is greed and selfishness, but what is really troubling is the violence: the beating, stoning and killing of the servants and the murder of the son by the tenants. And if you think this week's reading is bad, just wait until next week!

But we cannot let the violence of this parable distract us from the important reason why these ugly and vicious acts were committed. What did the tenants do what they did? Yes greed, but even more fundamental than that greed was possession. Anyone who has farmed knows the work behind managing a crop. The servants managed the vineyard, which meant they did the hard labor: tilled the soil, pruned the vines, plucked the grapes, and worked the winepress. They were the ones who were physically there, who occupied the land, and eventually this working, tending and living on the land led to a sense of entitlement and ownership. With the landlord absent and off in another country, the tenants took over and began to think of the vineyard as their own.

But if they did not own the land, what was their role? Workers? Caretakers? Being that today is the first Sunday in October, Stewardship Month here at St. John of the Cross, I am going to suggest that they were stewards. As stewards, they were to tend to the vine as best as they could to produce good fruit. They were to use their skills and knowledge, their brains and their muscles to create a healthy vineyard yielding an abundant crop.

All of us can probably make the connection between the tenants and the vineyard in our world today. Matthew sees the vineyard as the Kingdom and we are the tenants who are to tend to the vineyard and produce good works. But the vital ingredient to the harvest is remembering who exactly the owner is.

All of us have been given gifts, talents, skills and knowledge to build up God's Kingdom. But our gospel today reminds us that we are not the owners of the harvest, the good fruit that is produced. God is. This is easy to forget when we think of all the work we do. We work hard to pay for our rent, mortgages, cars and all other things we have. But the fact is that we do not really own any of those things. They are all good fruit, gifts from God, and we need to return some of that fruit to its rightful owner. God deserves God's share of the crop.

Anne Lamott makes a life-changing discovery in her book "Traveling Mercies." Her young son Sam is quite ill and needs lots of tests and bloodwork done. The case is quite serious and Ann is rightfully upset, but then she comes to realize that Sam, her own son, is not her possession. He is a gift of God whom she has been entrusted to care for and love. When she discovers this, she is finally able to let go, trust God and healing occurs.

In this world we live in, we, just like the tenants, are stewards, caretakers, not owners. All that we have—our homes, family, friends, health, life, talents—are God's. We do not own them. Perhaps the best way to remember this is that without God, we would have nothing, none of this. In fact, without God, we would not have life.

What are your gifts? How can you offer them to God, for God's service and to grow the Kingdom here on earth? Let us not be like the tenants, wanting to keep more than our fair share. May we give freely, lovingly and generously to God what has always been God's.