

The Rt. Rev. Gregory H. Rickel  
Proper 22, Year A  
Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20; Psalm 19; Philippians 3:4b-14; Matthew 21:33-46  
October 4, 2020  
Christ Church, Anacortes

So, I chose this Sunday to preach, for the diocese, for those who choose, because it was a convenient Sunday, and I had to preach anyway, for Christ Church, Anacortes, which I am so thankful to be able to do today, and also because I do want to speak to stewardship, and this is a good time to do it, and finally because I wanted to give our fabulous preachers around this diocese a day off from it, should they choose. Only later, did I realize that many of you will be celebrating St. Francis and perhaps the Blessing of Pets, today, so I do want to tip my hat to that. I think Francis would definitely approve of my premise, probably lived it out literally better than just about anyone ever did, and he had lots to say about that. Hopefully, there is something in this for those of you celebrating that today. Certainly that old saying by President Truman about Washington DC, "if you want a friend in Washington, get a dog" is really true in so many ways in life, "if you want a true, unconditional friend in this life, get a pet". So, along with many of you, we salute pets, animals, creation this day just as much.

And to honor Francis even more I will tell a story about him, some of you have heard me tell it before. I have been to Assisi several times. I love going there. IN the huge Basilica dedicated to him, down in the valley below Assisi, right in the midst of it, is the Porcincula, the small little chapel, tiny, purported to be the one Francis loved the most, also where he died, just feet from its walls. I read a book before I went the first time where a college history professor took his students, and as they stood in that Basilica, huge, covering this tiny chapel, the professor began to expound on the difference in Christendom and Christianity. at the end of his talk, going back and forth between Christendom, essentially what we humans tend to do to the church, and Christianity, the actual movement set in motion by God and Jesus, he pointed to that huge vaulted ceiling and said, that is Christendom, and then he placed his hand on the Porcincula, that little chapel, and said, but this is Christianity. The skin, the heart. GK Chesterton summed this up by saying, it is not that Christianity is all that bad, it's just that no one has ever tried it yet. Worth thinking about.

A few years ago, we had a President of this country, and I do mean another one, not speaking of our President now, who openly declared that this country, our society, was an "ownership society". I remember when I heard that the first time, it kind of jolted me, and I sat there wondering why. Why did that affect me so? An ownership society.

There is so much about what he said that is really true, we are an ownership society, so much of our worth as humans, in our society, revolves around and is judged upon, what we have, what we own. I am not saying that's a good thing, in fact, this sermon is going to try to disavow you of it, more than that i am not going to try to persuade you that an ownership society is bad or good, but, instead, that it is simply not us. It is not who we are. And by that, I mean, it is not Christian.

Jesus, for sure, if not Christianity also, is not an ownership society, an ownership kingdom, an ownership movement. In fact, if anything, Christianity is the complete opposite. This is the reason that Jesus spoke to money, our possessions in life, the idea of owning anything, as suspect, and as really a big issue for us, a big issue as in nothing could get in the way of our relationship with God more than our ownership of anything. He speaks of this directly over 60 times in the Gospels, and it is thought to be the one focus and topic he speaks of directly more than any other, save love itself. I believe, what he knew full well, is what he actually said in

one of those moments, that it is impossible for you to be fully devoted to your wealth, what you own, and to God. That you can't fully serve God, and your possessions. It is one or the other.

Over and over again, in many different ways, he makes this case. And today, in this Gospel he makes it again. This time, very directly. A landowner, who in this parable most definitely is God, rents out his land to a tenant, who in turn seems to forget, or not care about, the fact, that the land he is on, is not his, he does not own it, instead it is owned by someone else, and he is there to benefit from the land, to care for the land, to make a living off that land, but in so doing always realizing that he does not own it, and is called instead to be a steward of it. This tenant has not only forgotten all of that, but has even made the huge emotionally unintelligent leap to the belief that he can take the land, make it his, become the owner.

Here is the point today, the Kingdom of God is not an ownership society, not one bit, not at all. The Kingdom Jesus points to in this parable and so many of the parables and stories he uses, is that it is exactly the opposite. When you sign up to follow him, just as he bade the disciples, he bids us the same, leave everything behind, give it all away, and follow me. All of it. Jesus came and affirmed what had been Jewish law for centuries, the tithe, 10% of your wealth, of all your profits and harvest, of any kind, given back to the community of the faithful, this was required. And he affirmed that. In that same Jewish law and practice came with it the idea that real true, giving, what was known as alms, only started after that 10%. In other words, the tithe, 10% was expected, ...expected. Still to this day some Synagogues still ask their followers to provide their tax return, to set their expected tithe to the synagogue. Alms, true giving, only comes after that. So see, you are getting off pretty light if the tithe is all we are talking about. And I don't know of any church asking for your tax returns, although our unwillingness to speak of such things is a sermon for yet another day.

But then, along comes Jesus. And in this parable, he is the son, sent, with the landowner, God, believing if he sends his actual son, he will get more respect, and the tenant will listen. You see how that goes here. We saw how it went when Jesus, really did come. God is asking us to listen to Jesus too. And what does Jesus say about all of this. Well he affirms what I have just said, but he says, basically, over and over again, directly, and in parable, 10% is not good enough. What Jesus knew was this, for this to fully affect, and we might even say infect, your soul, you have to give it all away, all of it. You just can't be wed to that as your first priority, and also be able to have God, and the following of God, as your priority too. First, you have to give it all up. How do we do that in this generation? Of course, you can't simply pack all of your things up, put them out on the corner, throw down the keys to your house and car and whatever else and walk away. Well I guess you could, but you would be lost, here, and you would definitely be needing a lot of help. It is not what is being asked literally.

NO, the world's economy, the world's way, the ownership society we live in, is very real. It does exist. It is simply this, for us Christians, it is the world we live in, but it is not, any longer, our world. That is how monumental a shift Jesus asks for. 100%. It is what Christians vow to when they take on this mantle and this Way.

So, we don't sign over our deeds, or walk away from it all, but we do have to get it in our heads, hearts, life, and practice that none of it is ours. We don't believe in the ownership society anymore. We, instead, live in a stewardship society, and we live a stewardship life. Stewardship, means, caring for all that is in your hands, while knowing it is not yours, you don't own anything, you will pass it along to other stewards some day. IN essence, in becoming a Christian, you acknowledge that you are the tenant in this parable. You are there to work the land, to care for it, to give it back better than you found it, but to know it, never, as yours.

As I often say in my stewardship workshops, "there are no luggage racks on a hearse". It coincides with that old line, "you can't take it with you". That is true, and no one ever has

passed from this life with anything from this life, and no one ever will. We are called on by Christ to live the stewardship life, which is the life of eternity early. In other words, we are in practice for eternity, here, and now. That is what it means to be a Christian.

There is an old country sermon where the farmer, after a similar sermon to what I am attempting to preach today, invited the preacher over to his 1000 acre farm, and took the preacher out to a high vantage point, and said, look preacher, look out, as far as you can see, that land has been in my family, for as long as I can remember, and so I ask you, can you really say I am not the owner?

The preacher looked at him and said, ask me that in 100 years, or 1000, or in eternity. No piece of paper, no history, no human will, will ever make you the owner, when you are no longer here.

We Christians, or many of us, still use the tithe as our baseline. I am one of those. Currently my wife and I give away about 16% of our income each year. We have always made sure 10% goes directly to the church, now that is up to about 12%, the other 4% going to other causes we believe in. We are always striving to give away more because we know and believe the other 84% is not ours either, we are stewards of it.

Quite frankly, I have found that way of living to be so life giving, so liberating, so faithful. I hope you can find the joy and release in it too. My fellow followers of Jesus Christ, we are no longer owners, but instead stewards. May you fully know the freedom and gift of that truth.

Beloved, I have said these words to you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.