

Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20; Psalm 19; Matthew 21:33-46
19th Sunday after Pentecost A; 10.08.23; G. Miles Smith+

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O LORD, our strength and redeemer.
(Psalm 19:14)

Fall is the time in a lot of churches when they have something like an “annual stewardship campaign”. In fact, every church I have served has done that. And you’ll hear various language about “giving”, “pledging”, and “tithing”. There may be mention of “budgets” and “goals”. There may be *pleas* made and *exhortations* given. Some churches try to emphasize *gratitude* and others *duty*. There is inevitably something upon which to write down amounts of giving for the next year. And everybody mostly tries to be *polite* about it all because we recognize the necessity of it since we all have personal budgets too. But honestly, *it is easy to only give it the barest attention*. Thank goodness that, at Grace, and this year at All Saints too, we get to hear the heart-felt *Voices from the Pews*—our favorite part of our annual stewardship campaign.

But *the real problem with stewardship* is not the other familiar and routine things that we expect every year—*the reality is that stewardship is such a provocative idea*. Truth be told, the idea of stewardship is unsettling. Because we don’t want to imagine that we can functionally be like...the *tenants of the vineyard* in Jesus’ story. The landowner put his tenants in charge of his property...as stewards...and then they presumed *to make it their own*.

Of course, we know that we are not supposed to be like *them*. And we are horrified by how *wicked* they were in their behavior. But the inability of the *tenants of the vineyard*...to see themselves as *stewards of the landowner*...is disturbingly familiar. It is, after all, a perennial human problem. Which is why there is even such a thing as the *Ten Commandments*. Because someone has to remind us, for some reason, that it is the LORD who is our God—*and not we ourselves...and that we are stewards of God*.

Let me say it as plainly as we never really want to hear it. Absent some transcendent sense of responsibility to God and each other, we easily slip into thinking that...our *lives* are purely our own. That what we *have* is purely our own business. That what we can *get* is purely our own business. And instead of being stewards of our common life on earth for God, we unwittingly imagine ourselves solely in charge.

Unless there is some transcendent awareness of God.

So, maybe the best thing any of us could do before we ever touch an offering plate or a pledge card, is spend some time sitting outside--as the Psalm says: “The heavens declare the glory of God.” Or get to church in time to just be still for a while and be in the beauty of the space. Or visit a gravesite of family. Or hold a child...or be with a beloved horse or pet. And for a moment, not be distracted by the swirl of thoughts in our heads, but be where we are...as stewards of God ...within the glory of God.