

In the name of one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.

In the midst of the War of 1812, Commodore Oliver Hazard Perry, sent a dispatch back to Major General William Henry Harrison after the Battle of Lake Erie. The dispatch said, “We have met the enemy and they are ours - two ships, two brigs, one schooner and a sloop.” Then, some 150 years later, satirical cartoonist Walt Kelly made that dispatch considerably more famous when his ‘possum, Pogo performed his trademark butchery on it and turned it into, “We have met the enemy and he is us.” Frankly, Pogo’s version is the more enduring and clearly the more universal.

We have met the enemy and he is us. That’s what the elders, chief priests, scribes and Pharisees could have been saying after Jesus’ latest teaching to them. In the parable of the tenants, Jesus teaches through direct allegory. The difference between an allegory and a parable is that a parable is a self-contained story and an allegory has a connection to outside matters to get its true meaning. You see, in allegories, each element of the story has a direct corollary in life. So in this story the landowner is God. The vineyard is the nation of Israel. The slaves are the prophets and the son is, obviously Jesus. And the wicked tenants ...? Well, they are the leaders of the nation, those same elders, chief priests, scribes and Pharisees. We have met the enemy and he is us.

These leaders of the Hebrew people, leaders whose job it was to protect and defend the faith against all who would attack it, undoubtedly felt as though they had met the enemy and that enemy was Jesus. Just look at the end of the reading ... “they realized that he was speaking about them. They wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowds, because they regarded him as a prophet.” Likewise, Jesus knew that their challenge to His authority was a huge impediment to His getting the Good News to the greatest number of people, in the best way. AND, Jesus knew that this group would plot against Him, conspire and manipulate, until finally He would be crucified at the hands of the Romans.

As I told you last week, the enmity between Jesus and the leaders of the Jews didn't stem from the leaders being bad people, but rather from their misunderstanding of who Jesus was and their inability to grasp what His real mission was. And even though they knew that He was saying something against them in the allegory of the tenants, they didn't really get the depth of that message. And sometimes, I don't think we get it any more than they did.

You see, the landowner, God, has given the entirety of the world not just to the religious leaders of Jesus' day, but to us, the current tenants. God created everything that is ... the heavens and the earth; the seas; the birds, fish, and creatures of the land; every plant and every tree. God created the atmosphere which sustains our lives and the gravity that ties us to the earth. Every time our hearts beat, every breath we take, happens

because God created our bodies to be self-sustaining in that way. God created the entirety of the world and put us in place as the tenants of all of creation. We have been asked to care for God's world, and all that is in it; to nurture it and build it up; to plant and to tend; to support the cycles of life; so that when the harvest comes in, we might give back to the one who gave us all this abundance, some small token of our thanks for having all of this placed in our care.

We are *stewards* of the world. Every year at around this time, we hear that same message. This year, I'm going to ask you not to tune me out for just a minute. Give me just a little chance. See if perhaps, together we can begin to look at stewardship differently.

Stop me if I'm wrong, but ordinarily at this point in the sermon, the priest tells you about giving your tithe, ten percent of income to God and how that is your duty to God. Well ... I've told you in the past that I *do* believe in the tithe as a goal and a measure of our monetary giving to the church. However, this notion of being stewards over the whole creation certainly takes us way beyond that. If we extend (as I propose here) Jesus' allegory or analogy to allow it to encompass us and our times as well, we can see that God's making us stewards means much more than simply having faith enough in God's provision for our lives to allow us to write a check.

In the parable, God was understandably angry because the tenants, the stewards of God's property were keeping everything to themselves and refused to give back to the

provider, that which had been provided for *them*. Our basic American sense of fairness says that we should do differently. God put the stewards in place to manage God's resources and therefore they should have given back to God, that which belonged to God. But what if *everything* belongs to God? Rather than just giving that concept lip service, what if everything we have is not, in fact ours, but rather belongs to God – that we're just stewards over it all? What does *that* do to our understanding of this parable and our part in it?

Stewards have no ownership interest in property. They are the managers of the property. The apartment manager may make a living by looking after rental property, but if that manager decides to tear down a building or make another change, he had better consult the owner first. And the manager of the local Wal-Mart may share in the profits of that store, but she had better not do anything with the building or the merchandise that the owner has not approved first. It's the same with our relationship to God and the world.

We don't *own* anything here. Sure, we have legal documents that give us the right of possession over our houses, cars and other objects. But those documents keep us from fighting against each other, they have no effect whatsoever in our relationship with God. We do not even own the bodies in which we dwell. If you don't believe that, ask someone who has had a heart attack how it worked out when they told their body to stop that nonsense and get back to doing what they wanted to do.

No ... we're here for a little while (in the overall scheme of life) and God's creation goes on. The Native Americans got this concept right. They never had disputes over who owned land because they believed that the great spirits owned everything – the humans were only given dominion over the land during their short lives.

We have been given *everything* in our lives – bodies, minds, souls, and all of the “things” around us, for our care and keeping – not for our ownership. God, as the landowner in this story, is entitled to receive back from us a portion of what God has given over to us for our care. How do we do that? Do we write a check every week or every month – most of us for some amount of money that doesn't significantly impact our home budget – or do we start looking at everything in our lives and try to find meaningful ways to give back? I vote for the latter.

We have met the enemy and he is us. We are what gets in the way of looking at stewardship as stewardship. We are what gets in the way of going from an “annual begathon” campaign to a year-round attempt to give back to God from what God has entrusted us with. We need to begin to look at global warming as a stewardship issue. America's overuse of oil is a stewardship issue. The lack of recycling that clogs landfills and creates additional pollution is a stewardship issue. Letting our bodies get de-conditioned – like mine – creating a situation in which our bodies need more resources to keep going than they should, is an issue of stewardship. As is keeping people alive artificially, long after their bodies have ceased to be viable. Hoarding food, water and

money while other people have none is absolutely the kind of stewardship issue we hear about from Jesus. “if you do these things for the least of my children, you do them for me,” means that the stewards of the planet – *all of us* – are charged with caring for all the other stewards.

You see, it’s not about writing a check. That’s clearly part of it, but only a small part. It’s about committing to changing the way we view our place in God’s creation and acting accordingly. It’s about looking at all things differently and asking, “what would God want me to do to make the most of this, right here and right now?” The answer will always be, dedicate it to God; give it back for God’s use; and watch it flourish. We have met the enemy and he is us – but it doesn’t have to stay that way. Give it ALL back to God and let it be what God would have it be.

Amen.