

“We Are Not the Owners”
The Rev. Lauren McDonald
Bruton Parish Church – Williamsburg, VA
October 4, 2026

Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20, Psalm 19, Philippians 3:4b-14, Matthew 21:33-46

(At 9:15). Welcome Fur Friends. And human friends.

Happy Feast Day of St. Francis. Did you know that today is also the final day of the Season of Creation? It goes from September 1 to October 4. In 1989, the Ecumenical Patriarch Dimitrios I established September 1 as a Day of Prayer for Creation for the Eastern Orthodox Church. It's come to be known as the Feast of Creation in Christ. The World Council of Churches extended the celebration to October 4th, the Feast Day of St. Francis of Assisi. On this day, like many churches, we are blessing animals.

I'm guessing that many of us have known the love of a special animal. Whether it's a dog or cat or horse or guinea pig or hedgehog or snake. Whether it's a favorite creature we see out our window or one we've encountered when traveling or camping. Whether it's an animal we knew for many years or one we saw only once, most of us have had some special relationship with our fellow creatures in God's creation. These relationships are gifts. Sometimes people minimize their grief when their beloved pet dies, "I know he was just a pet..." they say. And I answer, no, our pets are our fur family, and many of them know us better than our human family. They are with us day in and day out, and they know us in ways that other humans can't.

Even though we may think of ourselves as pet owners, we don't own these fellow creatures on our earth. We didn't make them. We didn't cause them to come into our lives. Like our human family and friends, we get to love them, but we don't

own them. Like us, they are part of God's beloved creation. By God's will they were created and have their being. Not our will. They aren't ours.

And truly neither is anything else. Our lives are gifts from God. Our loved ones are gifts from God. Our gifts and talents were brought to us from God through the power of the Holy Spirit. Nothing we have is ours, truly. It's all a gift, given to us by our loving Creator, who trusts us to be good stewards of what we have been given. Whether it's taking good care of our pets and our gardens and our earth, or whether it's using our gifts and talents in service to God and creation, like the tenants in the vineyard of Jesus' parable, we are responsible for tending and nurturing what we have been given, for making sure that the gifts are available to all and that there is enough for everyone.

From the beginning, God breathed life into creation and called it good. In our written scriptures, we hear the story of God's covenant with the people of God. We just heard about God giving the Ten Commandments after liberating the ancient Israelites from slavery. God starts off by reminding them that they are free, that God has brought them out from Egypt to live as a community in relationship with God. The commandments aren't a demand; they are a covenant. Jesus will sum them up into two: love God – the first three commandments, love your neighbor – the rest of them. The love between God and the people God created sets out how people should be in relationship with each other.

God made the world and entrusted it to us. We are the tenants.

What happens when the tenants start to believe they are the owners?

In Jesus' story, and, we could argue, in the story of human history, as soon as people start to believe they are owners, rather than stewards, violence ensues. The

tenants kill the messengers, the prophets, and even the landowner's son. Had Jesus kept going, he might have described how the tenants would have turned on each other, fighting over who owned what part of the vineyard, neglecting and damaging the very thing that had been entrusted to their care. They forgot who they were. They forgot who owned the vineyard. And in that forgetting, they destroyed the very thing that bore the fruit.

Note that when Jesus asks the religious leaders what the landowner will do when he comes, they are the ones who say that the landowner will kill the tenants and give the vineyard to those who will care for it. He goes on to say that the one who is rejected will become the chief cornerstone. Jesus is the one who absorbs the violence and doesn't return it. He dies rather than perpetuate the cycle. And then he rises again — not in revenge but in forgiveness. Something new becomes possible. The fruit of the kingdom looks entirely different from the fruit of ownership.

This summer while I was on sabbatical, I went on a pilgrimage to the island of Iona off the western coast of Scotland. Each day in the morning, we learned about Celtic Christianity, the ancient Celtic saints, and the spirituality of creation, and each afternoon we ventured out onto the island. Our guide, Mary talked about how the Celtic saints didn't see themselves as over and above creation. They listened and learned, treated the animals as companions, understood the earth as a primary revelation of the divine, and sought the wisdom of the wild world. They saw every creature as a word God spoke into being, and all of creation as inherently good and interconnected. For Celtic Christians, creation was a primary text, scripture revealed through our senses, speaking to our bodies and souls, not only our heads.

St. Francis understood this too – referring to Brother Sun and Sister Moon and Stars, Brother Wind, and Air, and Fire, and Sister Earth our Mother. He lived in simplicity and service to others.

And so we gather here today, in gratitude for the gifts of creation and the love of the Creator. We remember that we are tenants, not owners, that everything belongs to God, the one who creates, redeems, and sustains us, the one who gives us life, joins us in this life, and continues to bring new life through all that is. As tenants, as we come together in community to remember who God is and who we are, as we promise again to love God and love our neighbors, I invite us all to consider the work we are being called to do as tenants – to tend to creation with love and to return its fruits to God. What might we do in our parish, our neighborhoods, our community to care for creation as the good stewards we are called to be?

As is often the case, I will end with a song, one of my favorites from Godspell:

We plow the fields and scatter the good seed on the land
Where it is fed and watered by God's almighty hand
He sends the snow in winter, the warmth to swell the grain.
The seedtime and the harvest and soft refreshing rain.
All good gifts around us are sent from heaven above, so thank the Lord, oh
thank the Lord for all his love.