

Church of the Servant, Wilmington, NC  
October 30, 2011 Stewardship/Annual Giving—Pledge Ingathering  
The Rev. Catherine Powell  
Gospel: Matthew 23:1-12

Members of our congregation told me recently that they have a new hobby: house-sitting. They go to an online site that matches people who want to travel with people who need their houses occupied. Our Wilmington folks recently spent time in a beautiful home in Colorado. They told me about how much they enjoyed the home's lower level "man cave," complete with cushy chairs and big screen TV. And the homeowners left them food and bicycles for touring around—well, honestly I don't remember all the details, my imagination takes over. Think of what you might find: the beautiful views, the terraced back yard with the heated pool, the fresh vegetables to eat and share!

Then it came to me: we are God's house-sitters.

We're given this beautiful world to live in, complete with fruits and vegetables for the picking, amazing views, opportunities for exploring and enjoying—and all we have to do is let out the cat and water the plants. And God gives us just the equipment we need to take advantage of this—handy little bodies with hearts already pumping, bodies that miraculously heal themselves if they get scrapes, complete with eyes and ears and everything. Plus, we get neighbors. People whom we can get to know. People who will help us and whom we can help. It is a great job, being God's house-sitters! It invites us to approach the world with pleasure and gratitude.

In today's Gospel, Jesus shows us two kinds of people. One kind approaches the world with pleasure and gratitude. The other does not. One kind approaches the world with this phrase: "Hey, look at this!" And the other kind approaches the world with this phrase: "Hey, look at me!"

Jesus notes that the "Hey, look at me" types love important jobs and titles. And they present themselves—usually not so subtly—as important. In Jesus' community all the men wore prayer shawls, but the "look at me" types had especially handsome ones, with long fringes. Many of the men prayed with phylacteries, leather boxes containing lines from scripture, but the "look at me" types had big, showy ones. If we used rosaries, the "look at me" types would have, not wooden beads, but beads made from diamonds. Or maybe they'd have, not an old dog-eared Bible, but a big one with an embroidered gold cover.

We all have a little bit of this" type in ourselves. But there are people around who have been taken over by the "look at me" mentality. This week I was driving in traffic behind a shiny, brand new Mercedes. It was a glistening red. My eyes moved down to the license tag and it actually said "U," then a dash, "envy," then a dash, "me." (I wanted to pull in front of that car and stick on a license plate that said "U annoy me.")

But Jesus tells us that we are not to be like that. We are not to be caught up with titles and show. No, he says, we are to be servants. You know, house-sitters are a kind of servant. House-sitters are stewards, housekeepers. They are trusted; they are left in charge. They enjoy, but with humility. They use, but with gratitude and responsibility. This kind of servant appreciates the generosity that gives her, or him, so much freedom and pleasure. They are curious and engaged, alert and appreciative—that's why they are the ones who say "hey, look at that."

We don't have to look around in traffic to find examples of this kind of person. We are the Church of the Servant, and here we have many servants, many good stewards of God's good gifts. We have many people who are engaged in life and see its experiences as rich and rewarding. We have people who love the oceans and have given their lives to studying and protecting them. (In fact, our congregation has an adopted sea turtle, Lefty!) And we have those who are drawn to the wonders of the Cape Fear River and all God's creatures that live in and around it.

We have people who go over to help at College Park Elementary. And they don't come back saying "look at me, I am so wonderful to help over there," they come back with stories of funny exchanges and eager children. And those who take out communion return and talk about how honored they feel to share that intimate experience with those they visit, and even those who help with the audit—not a very romantic task!—speak of how fortunate they feel to have been given the ability to be organized and work with numbers.

[This sermon originally ended with a quote from a Mary Oliver poem from her book *Thirst*, but I do not have access to it now so I've put in the following ending.]

Going through life knowing that we are stewards of God's endless gifts frees us from the burden of thinking that we build our worlds alone, and it invites us to lives of service, gratitude, and joy. As we offer our contributions of time, skills, and money today, may they flow from hearts that recognize our many blessings!