

Right there May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, oh Lord, our redeemer. Amen. This afternoon is the blessing of the animals, and, uh, I've been envying cats and dogs. Uh, cats especially. No worries, no concerns, no responsibilities, just self-centered luxury and domination. And here's the thing, if you're a cat, you can get away with this behavior. Uh, in fact, not only do you get away with it, people think it adds to your charm, and they make videos of you acting like you own the place and post them on YouTube. Yes, friends, as the old Disney cartoon puts it, everybody wants to be a cat. Because if you're a cat, you can act like a jerk just because it's Wednesday, and people will love you for it. You sleep 18 hours a day, you don't have to obey anyone, and you don't get disciplined the way a dog does. In ancient Egypt, they even worshiped cats, and rather than being self-conscious about that, I expect the cats felt gratified that we at last had understood their true divine nature. Nowhere is antisocial behavior tolerated as normal and celebrated as virtuous quite like in the world of the feline. And of course, that is planet Earth, because it's their world and we're just the staff. The problem with cats, they think they own the place. The problem with humans, they think they own the place. The problem with clergy, well, they think they own the place. The priests Jesus encountered certainly did, but rather than inflicting them with a swarm of cats to show them the bitter truth, Jesus told them a story. We read it just now. It's a story about a landowner, a good landowner, a giving landowner, a landowner who respects his land and loves his people. He has a vineyard, a beautiful vineyard, a bountiful vineyard, a vineyard so large and so fruitful that the owner lets it out to tenant farmers. These are diligent tenant farmers, conscientious tenant farmers, tenant farmers who are so focused on growing their crops that they forget that they are just tenants and act like a pride of cats. They start to believe like they own the place. But however hardworking the tenants are, they are still tenants, and they owe rent to the landowner. And here's where the story turns grim, because when the owner sends his

agent to collect the rent, the tenants go feline on him, and they act like they own the place. They beat him up and send him away empty-handed. So the landowner sends another rent collector, and this time the tenants don't just attack him, they kill him. The landowner sends a third a- agent, and he too is murdered. And so the landowner, the good landowner, the giving landowner, the landowner who respects his land and loves his people, sends his own son. Surely, however badly they have behaved so far, they must respect his own flesh and blood. And the shocking outcome, they murder his child. As with many of his stories, Jesus doesn't explain the meaning of this one. He doesn't rip the mask off the landowner and reveal his true identity. He doesn't name the murderous tenants either. He leaves the job of wrestling with these characters and the meaning of the parable to the crowds who lapped it up. But there was one group of listeners who get it. They are not amused. The fat cats, the cats who get the cream, the people who thought they owned the place. The religious leaders knew they were the villains in this morality tale. They swaggered around town. They feasted in the finest restaurants. They smiled and nodded with fake humility when people scampered out of their way in the street. Look those verbs in the story. The owner of the vineyard plants and digs and builds. Active verbs, hardworking verbs, productive wor- verbs. Now look at the tenants. They seize and throw out and beat and stone and kill. Sure, they are also hardworking, active verbs, but with the opposite impact. They destroy, they ruin. That's what happens when humans take over the work of God. Church history is littered with moments of glory and movements of grace when God took the initiative, breathed into the imaginations of men and women, and gave birth to something magnificent. Scattered in every county of England are testimonies to God's abundant work and the church's abject failure. I'm talking about the ruins of church buildings. They were constructed with excitement, vision, passion, and once finished, they housed thrilling worship, heartfelt prayer, heavenly music, and dynamic preaching. But not now. God's people dwindled and

moved out. The law of gravity overpowered the ancient stone walls, and they crumbled. Creation reclaimed the land. Grass grows and sheep graze next to those stones. For 2,000 years, God has poured out His Spirit, revived communities, planted churches, fanned the flame of transforming love, and then after a while, the people settle down, and then fatally, they take over the vineyard and ruin results. Not at first, usually, but over time, the energy of the people turns inward. The vision of the leaders becomes comfort. The passion for evangelism and renewal becomes the sins of self-promotion and kingdom building. What is left after humans have taken over the vineyard might look attractive on the outside, successful even, but ruin will come. It must. It has to. This vineyard can't thrive for long while the tenants run the show. What a lesson for us in historic congregations. Don't lose the fire. Fan it into flame and let God own His vineyard. The problem with cats is they think they own the place. The problem with clergy is they think they own the place. The problem with teachers and bankers and scientists and homemakers and computer geeks and shop workers and lawyers and students and retired people and children and government employees and musicians and office managers and writers and doctors and nurses and people who can't work because they're sick or disabled and caregivers and insurance people and military personnel and law enforcement officers and groundskeepers and gardeners and building managers and engineers is that we all can act like we think we own the place. Disney was right. Everybody wants to be a cat. But it's the first day of our stewardship campaign, so let's expand this metaphor. Let's see the vineyard not as just the church, but the whole of creation. How big do you want to get? In the vineyard of this world, we humans are called to manage, not control; care for, not exploit; steward, not own. The owner of our vineyard is invisible. Maybe, we think to ourselves, he doesn't even exist. It's we who are the true owners. We are the ones out in the heat of the day, working hard, tending the ground, planting the vines, growing the grapes, picking the fruit. What's the owner doing? He isn't even helping. He's

more like a slum lord. You never see him until the rent is due, and then it's all threats. If it were not for us, the owner wouldn't even have a vineyard. He'd have a wilderness, a field of rocks and weeds. It's we who are the hard workers, the smart investors, the wealth creators. How dare he send his rent collectors and demand our hard-earned produce? Acting like we own the place I have a theory, and if I'm right, then if we were to practice my theory, we would be purring. All nine lives would be spent in blissful contentment. We won't be cats on a hot tin roof of agitation. We won't be killed by curiosity, trying to gain things that are out of our reach. Here's my theory. If God truly owns the vineyard and we are just the tenants, then we need not worry about our material needs. If God owns everything and we own nothing, then it's not our stuff to get anxious about. If God owns everything and we own nothing, then we ne- need, need not fear a crash in the markets or an economic meltdown, even if it happens. If God owns everything and we own nothing, then we need not get bent out of shape by how much tax we pay. It's not our money, so why react like it is? If God owns everything and we own nothing, then we will become joyful givers. We will be like tables on which God can place his stuff for a time and remove it at others. We won't grasp and grab and hoard and lust and steal and cheat. If God owns everything and we own nothing, then we need not look at our pledge card like it is God's 1040. You know, church tax seen through the lens of scarcity with the pain of resentment. If God owns everything and we own nothing, then we need not get bogged down in complex mathematical questions like, is 10% God's and 90% mine, or is 5% God's and 95% mine, or what? If God owns everything and we own nothing, then we are free from worry, greed, fear, envy, and all those things that rob us of our peace, deprive us of our joy, steal from us our sleep, and defraud us of quiet contentment in the love of God. There's a question I don't want you to ask me. It may have fluttered across your mind when I was explaining my theory of happiness. It's, "How's that working for you, preacher?" I don't want you to ask that because I have

no real answer. The cat has got my tongue. If you insist on asking me, I will look at my feet and shuffle nervously, and I'll confess that there's a reason it's just a theory. You see, I haven't tested it yet. I'm scared. I'm the kitten stuck up a tree. I think I might be able to jump and land safely, but I'm not sure, and I'm too timid to try. What if there's no one there to catch me? What if the owner of the vineyard doesn't actually own everything after all? What if it really is everyone for themselves, and I had better worry and fear and envy and grab whatever I can and cling onto it for grim death? So I'm not living my theory, and I'm too scared to try. But maybe, with the help of our good and generous landowner, I can take kitten steps. Will you join me? Dare we, this autumn, this season of fruitfulness, this stewardship campaign, make a small change in the way we see the world? A bit less of my ownership and a bit more of God's Amen