

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend David J. Powers
Sunday, March 3, 2024

That is going to be really hard to follow.

So the Narrative Lectionary moves us forward a bit this morning. It moves us to a scene just after the triumphal entry of Our Lord into Jerusalem, and we just need to be aware of this, because that happens in Mark, Chapter 11, in the Gospel. And upon this entry the religious leaders—the chief priests, the scribes, and the Pharisees—they are really paying attention to what Jesus is doing. And they not only know that he's gathered a good amount of people and some good energy as he's made his way into the city, but they are...they're aware of the way in which his power that he brings in humility is challenging to their power. And so they begin to ask questions at the end of the 11th chapter of the Gospel of Mark, specifically, “In whose name and by whose authority are you doing these things, healing people, preaching?” Okay? And so they ask him this, and there's a little bit of a back and forth. It's a really interesting text that I encourage you to go back and read, but you need to know the context, because that happens just before we get the parable we're about to read in Mark 12, okay? So not only are there people who are gathered around who are here in this parable, but also the chief priests, the scribes, and the Pharisees. They are listening intently to what Jesus is teaching in the parable. We'll read together from the Gospel of Mark, the 12th chapter, verses 1-12, but before that, let us go to God in prayer.

Gracious and loving Spirit, meet us here. Meet us here and fall fresh. Quiet within us any voice but your own, that we might hear your word for us this day, and that in hearing we might respond. So may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you, God, Our Rock and Our Redeemer. Amen.

Then Jesus began to speak to them in parables. “A man planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a pit for the winepress, and built a watchtower; then he leased it to tenants and went away. When the season came, he sent a slave to the tenants to collect from them his share of the produce of the vineyard. But they seized him and beat him and sent him away empty-handed. And again he sent another slave to them; this one they beat over the head and insulted. Then he sent another, and that one they killed. He had still one other, a beloved son. Finally, he sent him to them, saying, ‘They will respect my son.’ But those tenants said to one another, ‘This is the heir; the heir to come, let us kill him, and the Inheritance will be ours. So they seized him, and killed him, and threw him out of the vineyard. What then will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and destroy the tenants and give the vineyard to others. Have you not read the scripture:

“The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord's doing and it is amazing in our eyes’?”

When they realized that he had told this parable against them, they wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowd. So they left him and went away.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

It's amazing when a preacher or a teacher or a comedian walks a crowd down a line and then sets a hook. Maybe you've seen it with...with someone that you like to watch on YouTube or a

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television show or even a preacher. I was watching one of my favorite sermons ever, one I've talked about here, watching it from about 11 years ago. The sermon was preached by a fellow named Amos Disasa. He's a pastor at First Presbyterian Dallas now. I've talked about this sermon before. What I hadn't realized in all the times that I'd listened to it and watched it, which is probably in the tens or maybe even hundreds now, is the masterful way in which he walks this crowd that he is preaching to, this congregation. He walks them down a road, and then he sets a hook. This is a group that he is preaching to called Next Church. Back in the, um, the early teens, early 2000 teens, there was this movement, and there continues to be a movement, but it had just begun, about imagining as church leaders what the next manifestation of the church was going to look like and be in the world. And like good Presbyterians there was a Next Church committee that was put together, and then we started having Next Church gatherings and conferences. They asked Amos to preach because the church that he was pastoring in Columbia, South Carolina, a church called Downtown Church, was a church that he had planted in his living room with his wife and exactly one baptized member. That was their son. This church had grown to hundreds of people, and so Amos was the one who was supposed to have his finger on the pulse of what the church would be next. He preached the Pentecost text from Acts 2. Y'all know the scene. Everyone's gathered together in one place, and then Scripture tells us that the spirit descends on them like a mighty, violent, rushing wind. And all of a sudden a tongue rests on each of them. They begin to speak in languages they don't know and understand in languages they've never studied before, and all of them are amazed; but some of them jeer. All of them are amazed by the movement of the spirit, but some of them think that those who have these flaming tongues are simply drunk. So Amos is preaching to this congregation full of...of Presbyterians, specifically of pastors and elders and deacons, good church people. What he decides to enumerate in this sermon are those who jeer, what he describes as the wallflowers. I've talked about this one before on Pentecost, these wallflowers who sit on the edge and watch the exciting thing happen; and instead of joining in and dancing and singing, they mock and question the sobriety of the gathered people. And as he's preaching, this group is just—he has them, right? Maybe you've heard a sermon like that, maybe preached here or somewhere else, right, where a preacher just has the congregation in the palm of their hand. They are laughing when he wants them to laugh. They are 'amening' when he wants them to a...(is that a word?) when he wants them to amen. They're doing all the things that show he's got them.

And in the midst of one of the more boisterous sessions of laughter, Amos stops preaching, and he says, "It's about to not be funny. I'm going to need you to hold on a second." And then he begins to describe the wallflowers, the ones not enjoying the movement of God's spirit, but the ones who stand on the side and on the edges and mock and jeer and question. He says the wallflowers—this is how he describes them—are the serious, deliberate, moderate adults in the room, endowed with titles they swap with each other like Pokemon cards. And someone says "ouch" in the congregation. "They have all the wisdom that their provincial life experiences have given them, and nothing more," he says. For about 14 minutes this preacher has walked them down the road, and instead of laying the hammer on someone else, he holds up a mirror to them and says, "It's...it's actually y'all. It's me too, but it's y'all."

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Jesus has just made his way into Jerusalem, and he begins to tell a story about a field. He says “I want you to imagine that there was this field, and someone was looking to purchase a piece of property; and they looked out upon this field, and they said I think a vineyard could be there.” So they bought this property. The first thing they did was they put a nice fence around the property. They ran fence for a long time, probably took them months to do, right? Then they said, “If this is going to be a vineyard, we need...we need to dig out a press.” And that probably took days or weeks to do and to do well. “And then if we want to be able to keep an eye on everything that's going on in our vineyard, we're going to build a watchtower.” And so the owner of this property did that as well, but the owner knew that they weren't that much into wine, but other people would be, so they rented out the property. And the way the economy worked then, and in some ways in God's economy it still works, is that the time of the harvest came, and when the time of the harvest came, the land owner, the vineyard owner, sent a servant to say, “Hey, the first fruits, those are the vineyard owner's to have. I'm here to receive them.” And the tenants take that person and beat him and send him out empty-handed, Jesus tells the gathered people. So the vineyard owner sends another and then another. The first one gets beaten, the next one gets killed: and then and then finally he says, “I've only got one left and it's my beloved son. They will certainly respect my son.” But when the son arrives, those who have been working the land and have been enjoying the spoils of the fruit of...the fruit of the ground—they say, “Let us seize this one. Let us kill him, and we'll actually get to inherit this land.” At some point in the story if the chief priests and the scribes and the Pharisees were paying attention, they might have understood what was happening, but they couldn't stop him from telling the story. Maybe they started to recognize what was happening about halfway through, but he was going to finish. When he's done they realize he's just walked them down the road, and the story isn't about tenants in a vineyard, it's about them—the religious leadership and the people. Jesus tells the parable because, contrary to what you might think, he actually does care for the souls and the spirits of those religious leaders. He isn't just telling the story to make them look terrible. He's telling the story because he cares about their spirits too. He desires for them a more full life than they are living, but he's telling it to them because love means telling the truth; and in this case he is keenly aware that they have lost the plot of the story. Somewhere along the line they have gotten things twisted. Somewhere along the line they have forgotten that it ain't their field; they have forgotten that they didn't run the fence; they have forgotten that they didn't dig out the winepress with their hands; they didn't build the watchtower. They have bought in at some point to a story that isn't true. They've become drunk on their own wine or in this case maybe power. They have lost the plot. They are tenants not the vineyard owner.

Sometimes we lose the plot too. We forget our place and our position in this grand story. When they recognize that the story is about them, the text tells us that they wanted to arrest Jesus, but they feared the crowd. Their response to a story that convicts them is anger and fear. That's not how they had to respond though. You know that, right? We have a choice when we hear stories that convict us. We have a choice when we hear a story that says you've lost the plot, you need to be drawn back in. They could have been convicted. They could have repented right there in that moment. They could have been baptized. They could have changed their ways, but the cost of

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that recognition would have been their power in the society that they had constructed, and so they chose anger over humility. They chose the sin of fearfulness over accountability. Jesus didn't desire for them to make this decision, but they did make that decision. What my imagination tells me is that Jesus would have preferred if they would have responded with humility, if upon hearing this convicting story they would have said, "You're right; we get it. All of this is God's. All these people, this temple, this city, this world—all of this is God's, every bit of it. And God wants us to enjoy every bit of it, but God also desires that we might live in right relationship with the covenant that has been made with us by the vineyard owner." If they would have chosen humility, they would have also chosen healing. What Jesus knows is that humility brings healing. Humility brings healing because it wakes us up to the truth that we are tenants in this world. That we did not build this. That we didn't spend the time imagining what it could be and then running a fence line and then digging a press or a watchtower. We didn't do any of that stuff. We are inheritors of it. And the God that we worship doesn't actually desire some exorbitant gift from us. We don't owe some ridiculous amount to this God. That's not what the vineyard owner asks of the tenants. It's the first fruits, a portion, that is owed. Just the first fruits, just our first thoughts, just our first hopes, just our first dreams, our fidelity, the first of our faithfulness. God doesn't desire more than God's share, although all of it is God's share. God doesn't desire more than God's share, but God does desire God's share. God doesn't desire all of your time, but God does desire your time. God doesn't desire all of your wealth, but God does desire your wealth. God doesn't desire all of your attention, but God does desire your attention.

And the response of the...the really religious folks, instead of being fear, instead of being arrogance, it could have been humility. And if it would have been, it would have been healing, because what Jesus knows is that when we cling to the powers that are somehow gifted to us in this world—maybe titles that we swap with each other like Pokemon cards—when we cling to those powers, we will become ever increasingly fearful and easily offended. When you have convinced yourself that although you are a tenant on the vineyard, you actually are the vineyard owner, it will make you fearful when someone comes and asks for a bit of the crop that has been produced. When you have structured your life in a way where you are safe and influential and powerful, where the structures that you create in the world benefit your friends and those closest to you only, you will be offended when someone questions that structure. What I love about the Narrative Lectionary and its wisdom moving this text into the Lenten season instead of letting us get to it just over Holy Week, is that it gives us space to be reoriented, to be right sized as Mary mentioned a few weeks ago—right sized into who we are. If we have lost the plot in this story that we are living right now, if we have somehow convinced ourselves that we aren't tenants, but we are vineyard owners, that we aren't ones that have inherited this beautiful thing that God has done in the world, but somehow we're the ones that constructed it, then Lent gives us the opportunity to instead of choosing fear and offense, to choose humility, to be corrected, to recognize that God desires of us what God asks of us. And that isn't an exorbitant deduction of any kind. It is an invitation to share blessing with the Divine, to take the first fruits and to understand in humility they aren't ours. I wonder how the story of the rest of this week that Jesus was about to experience might have been different had the chief priests and the scribes and the

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Pharisees not responded with anger to this convicting story, not desired to arrest him, if they weren't so afraid of the crowd. But if they would have heard it and said, "Ouch, that's about me. but there's something I can do about it. By God's grace I can start reconstructing some things, reorienting myself, remind myself that I am a tenant in this beautiful vineyard that's been gifted."

I wonder what it would be like if you or I or we went about asking that same question in this season of Lent.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, one God, Mother of us all.

Amen.