

Mark 12: 1-12
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The Story I Need to Hear

We've been here before, sort of. Late last fall Isaiah spoke to us about a vineyard, one that the faithful gardening God tended and nurtured only to be disappointed by the sour grapes it produced. Throughout the Hebrew scriptures or Old Testament, the people of God and Israel are represented by a vineyard. So when Jesus starts telling a vineyard story, the Jewish ears in the audience perk up. 2000 years removed from the scene, we have been claimed as God's people, too, so our ears should perk up as well. That said, once we hear this story, we would probably prefer to distance ourselves from it. It's not a happy vineyard story. It's an angry story loaded with fear and violence and vengeance. If this story were a movie I stumbled upon one evening, I'd likely give up and go re-watch *Ted Lasso*. There's enough anger and violence and vengeance out there. I don't really want to hear a tale of anger and violence and vengeance in here. That's not what I come to church for. Goodness, Jesus, couldn't we stick with reminders about welcoming the little children or the joy of a blind man who leaps up at the sound of your voice?

I have grown *almost* numb to the steady stream of news about the ongoing war between Hamas and Israel and the seemingly never-ending campaign in Ukraine. Anger seems to be the language of choice on a national scale as well. Debates turn into shouting matches. Name-calling and threats and power grabs are par for the course. We see it in the workplace, too. Colleagues and co-workers jockey for promotions, undermining one another for a bigger piece of an ever-shrinking pie. Sadly, we see it in families, too. Power and control trample

compassion. Jealousy and suspicion win out over patience and trust. And in the end, at every level, everyone loses. Victory is hollow when the prize is a destroyed vineyard.

Mark's language is difficult, but it fits the context. In chapter 11, Jesus enters Jerusalem. He marches right in and starts upsetting the powers that be. Ahead of today's text he has turned over tables in the temple and refused to answer the religious leaders' questions about where he gets the authority to do and say all that he says and does. Now Jesus tells another parable, and this time he tells it to them, to these same leaders. As I mentioned earlier, Mark's original hearers' ears would have perked up at the mention of the vineyard. If they weren't paying attention to Jesus before this, they are now, especially when he starts talking not only about the vineyard but about the ones who tend that vineyard. The parable is an allegory, a story that draws lines from each character in the story's world to someone or something in the real world. So the tenants are the religious leaders, the servants are the prophets, the vineyard is the people of Israel, the son is Jesus, and the landowner is God. Pretty straightforward...and downright disturbing. It has been argued that this parable informs the rest of Mark's gospel.¹ From here on out, Jesus will confront and call out the religious leaders for their failure to tend the vineyard, the people entrusted to their care. And as we know, that will not go well.

Mark's original audience may have been tempted to cheer on Jesus. "Let 'em have it, Jesus!" "Throw the book at those scoundrels!" "Make 'em pay!" "Throw the bums out!" We might be tempted to cheer along too, to join our outraged voices and point fingers at those others who got it so wrong. But I have this nagging suspicion that Jesus would be the first to turn to me and say, "Not so fast, preacher." This story does not stay put in the past. The early

¹ Charles, Gary and Blount, Brian. *Preaching Mark in Two Voices*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002, p. 192, as cited by Jarrett McLaughlin in his paper for The Well 2015.

church had its moments. The church through the ages has continued to have its moments, too. We have fallen into the wicked tenant role more times than we'd like to admit. With each generation there is a temptation to do it again and again and again. We've been known to focus too much on our wishes and our ways. Too frequently, we've convinced ourselves that what we want is what God wants. The church has picked the wrong side on any number of issues, like slavery and Civil Rights. On occasion we in the church have been known to turn our gaze perilously inward. There have been moments when we have been overly concerned with the color of the carpet or the placement of the chairs while turning our backs on the grieving ones in our midst or the hungry ones on our doorstep or the embattled ones a world away. These missteps have caused some to write us off. These mess-ups have led some to say we are hypocritical, cruel, or even irrelevant. And at our worst, those voices are right. But thanks be to God, God doesn't take his cues from those voices. Tucked in this passage, Jesus himself offers a word of hope even as he offers a word of challenge, a word of grace even as he speaks a word of judgment.

Jesus tells us that following the death of his son, the landowner will destroy the tenants and give the vineyard to other tenants. This is why I want to watch *Ted Lasso* instead. I have a hard time with the language of wiping people off the face of the map, especially if God is the one doing the wiping. Mark's gospel is written around the year 70 CE, a time when Rome has demolished Jerusalem, including the Temple. Mark's community is staring down a desolate landscape. The vineyard in many ways is already destroyed. The religious leaders have not held off the empire by cozying up with Caesar's cronies. Jesus' words about God planting a new vineyard could be heard as great good news. All is not lost. In Jesus' words, we could hear a

promise that God is intent on dismantling the corrupt system to create something new in its place. This new thing will be built on this overlooked and cast aside stone—a Greek word that bears a striking resemblance to the word for *son*.² The discounted rock will be the cornerstone, the first building block of this new kingdom, this new vineyard, this new community. There is hope because God can build something with what others cast aside, what others discount, what others write off. God can and does build something new even in the midst of a trampled vineyard.

It would be hard to name someone who held more power in South Africa forty years ago than Adriaan Vlok. He was Minister of Law and Order, charged with overseeing the police and putting an end to the protests by black South Africans demanding an end to Apartheid. He directed police to fire into crowds and to arrest anyone who might be seen as a leader of the unrest. At one point he gave the go ahead for the assassination of the Rev. Frank Chikane, a key member of the anti-apartheid leadership. Chikane's clothing was laced with poison; he barely survived. Always a devout Christian, Vlok believed that his views of white supremacy were in keeping with his faith. He was convinced that God believed just as he did. On the heels of the end of Apartheid and the first all-race election, somehow Vlok's views began to change. One could argue cynically that his change of heart was conveniently timed to coincide with his appearance before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission to answer for his crimes, but his conversion seemed to run deeper than that. Before his death a little over a year ago, Vlok spent his days delivering food to several daycare centers in black townships. He sang with small black children. He wanted to do what he could to make amends. He repented, and he sought

² As cited by Jarrett McLaughlin in his paper for the Well 2015.

forgiveness. He sought out Reverend Chikane and asked if he could wash his feet. In astounding grace, courage, and faith, Chikane ultimately agreed, and they prayed and cried together. There are some who still doubt Vlok's sincerity. Some still believe he should have served more than a suspended sentence for his crimes. Dinah Sekese disagrees. She bears the scars of rubber bullets fired by some of Vlok's police officers during a protest in 1986. As it so happened, Vlok delivered food to the community center Dinah runs, and they became friends. As she told the story of her ducking stones thrown at her head only to be hit by those bullets, she cried while Vlok patted her shoulder and offered her a handkerchief. Vlok recognized that he could not take away Dinah's scars, but he could try to build something new and hopeful alongside her. And building was Dinah's focus too:

Here in our country, the...thing that we appreciate is when a person comes out and says, sorry. Can you please forgive me? It's what we want. And I believe it's something that builds...peace.³

Because of his faith in this rabble-rousing Christ, Adriaan Vlok changed his wicked tenant ways. Once a tenant who sought to protect a system that insured his privilege and his power at all costs, Vlok had a change of heart. Early on Vlok ruled from the watchtower and trampled any and all who stood in the way of his keeping the vineyard for himself and for those like him. Then he repented and chose to serve within the fragile new community still being built on that tossed aside cornerstone.

We are in the thick of the season of Lent, a holy season of reflection and repentance. Despite what you may have heard, we Christians are not perfect. We make mistakes. We are

³ <http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/a-ruthless-defender-of-apartheid-now-seeks-forgiveness/>

not always the best tenants. We confess our sins each and every week in worship, and this parable reminds us why that is so crucial. We need to confess the ways we have failed God and those whom God has called us to serve, because only in that confession are we able to hear the word of grace here. And that word is here, tucked in with a word of judgment. We have not always been the best tenants God could choose. All fall short of what God intends, Paul reminds us. Some have been more awful than others; some have wielded their power and insider status more cruelly and cynically, while others have looked the other way. And yet God still chooses us, all of us. God holds out hope, because God wants to build that new kingdom with us and with all.

Jesus walks right into the trap. He walks right into the vineyard knowing full well that he will lose his life. And he gives his life to save ours, to usher in a new kingdom, to show us God's unstoppable love face to face. This love embraces the most ungrateful and ungracious of tenants, including me. This love sets a table and invites us to eat our fill. And this love goes to the cross for the sake of every last one of us. So maybe I won't change the channel this time. Maybe it is the reminder I need to look for ways to get back to tending God's vineyard, following the Son, discarded by some, beloved by God, the very cornerstone of God's coming kingdom. Maybe this is exactly the story I need to hear.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.