

Most of you know we have been following the progressive path of Jesus through the eyes of the evangelist, Mark. Last week, we were in chapter 10, and Jesus and the disciples were on the doorstep of Jerusalem, in Jericho. Jesus had told his disciples for the third and final time that when they get there Jesus “will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death.” (10:33) And the last act Jesus performs before entering Jerusalem is to restore back into the community one who bore the name “son of impurity” (Bartimaeus) by highlighting his faith’s power to see. The coupling of these stories is a signal to all those who wish to follow Jesus to open their eyes and grasp what is mandated to those who wish to be a disciple.

Because of the Church calendar, our lectionary skips over chapter 11. For in it, is Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem. As we know, it is no official parade filled with pomp and circumstance. Instead, his disciples secure for him a colt of a donkey to ride through the streets, fulfilling the words prophesied in Zechariah 9:9 - *Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt.* (We’ll dwell more fully on this in its proper setting on Palm Sunday.)

With this humble entry, Jesus signals that he will be a very different “messiah” than that for which most people were hoping. He brought no organized army to overthrow the occupying Romans. Instead, he’s followed by a ragtag group of people who see God in him.

Jesus' first order of business in the Holy City is to go into the temple, where he is disgusted at the exchange of financial currencies, and angrily overturn the tables; thereby serving notice that he is there to be paid attention to. And it doesn't take long, for almost immediately, he is approached by the temple leaders who question his authority to be doing these things. They try to trap Jesus with a question, but he quickly rattles them by returning theirs with a question that reveals their true motives. This is the context for today's texts.

Chapter 12 opens with Jesus telling "them" a parable. If we don't know what's happened at the end of chapter 11, we may assume that the audience to whom Jesus is addressing the parable is either his disciples or a generic crowd.

However, as we will see at the conclusion of the parable and into the question about paying taxes, the audience is clearly the temple leaders.

Understanding the context helps make some sense of what can be a rather vexing teaching story. Indeed, that's what parables are, teaching stories.

Stories bearing one meaning at face value, that also carry loaded meanings that can be grasped by those who have eyes to see (recall the blind man!).

Jesus begins the story by speaking of a vineyard. His audience would have automatically connected with another vineyard poem; found in Isaiah 5:

My friend had a vineyard  
on a fertile hillside.

2 My friend dug the soil, cleared the stones,  
and planted it with choice vines;

Then within it built a watchtower,  
and constructed a winepress.

My friend anticipated the crop of grapes,  
but what it yielded was wild grapes.

3 And now, inhabitants of Jerusalem  
and people of Judah,  
judge between me and my vineyard:

4 What more could I have done for my vineyard that I haven't done?

In this poem, the “problems” for the vineyard owner are the grapes. They are wild...not able to be domesticated...they do their “own” thing. In Isaiah, this is an allegory about the people of Judah ignoring God’s commands and following other gods, or whatever else made them happy. This is what Jesus’ audience would have been expecting him to be addressing in his parable.

But Jesus veers from Isaiah. Once the vineyard creator has done the work, that one leaves, and puts “tenants” in charge of the vineyard. Jesus thereby makes the focus move away from the community of the “vineyard,” and shines the spotlight on its caretakers. (I hope you all are following me!)

As the harvest comes, the vineyard creator sends a servant to collect a share of the produce. Instead of that simple transaction being made, the caretakers beat up the servant, and send the servant away empty handed. In the allegory, if God is the creator of the vineyard, what is the “share” God desires to collect? Is it praise? Acknowledgement? Gratitude? You know, as in love the Lord your God, with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength? But were the caretakers so worried about getting “theirs”--doing it on their own--forgetting who built the vineyard--that they didn't want any interference from the Creator? And when the Creator's agent came (angel? prophet?) all they did

was abuse them. Then each time another came, in their own guilt and shame the tenants abused the messengers, or worse killed them, until...now we get closer to Jesus' point...the heir of the kingdom comes and they, to quote words that appear earlier in the gospel, they "mock him, and spit upon him, and flog him, and kill him." (10:34)

At the conclusion of the parable, Jesus asks, "What then do you think will happen? The owner of the vineyard will come and destroy the tenants and give the vineyard to others." And again he quotes scripture (Ps 118:22) about how the stone that the builders reject will become the chief cornerstone, and how amazing it is what God is able to accomplish! And he gives everyone a chance to interpret the teaching for themselves.

The religious leaders, who have already plotted to get rid of Jesus, immediately see themselves in the role of the abusive caretakers and desire to nab Jesus there and then ... alas they are afraid that their opinion polls will plummet, so they wait until a more opportune time. (*ala Satan, see Luke 4:13*)

As if to drive the point home regarding how deeply in the pockets of the Romans were the "caretakers" of the Jewish faith, Mark shares the story of one more trick question that backfires on the leaders.

As a bit of background to this story, recall the instructions Jesus gave his disciples when he sent them out into the community in pairs. Do you recall?

Jesus ordered them to take nothing for their journey except a staff;

no bread, no bag, **no money in their belts**; 9 but to wear sandals and not to put on two tunics. (Mark 6)

So, some leaders come to Jesus--remember these are Jewish religious leaders! They ask him about whether or not it is “lawful” for them--that is, faithful Jews--to pay taxes to the emperor?

Jesus basically rolls his eyes at them and their attempt to trick him, and again returns the favor. He asks them for what sounds like an innocuous enough request - for them to hand him a coin that bears the image of Caesar. As harmless as this request sounds, it is a major tell regarding the true fidelity to God of those in the conversation. The second commandment of the Torah speaks to not worshiping any idols, which prohibits honoring any graven image. Jesus, who carried no coins, finds the religious leaders at the ready with a coin in their possession. By pulling out the coin, one of these leaders convicts himself; and does so even more when Jesus asks whose image is graven upon the coin, and the leader admits that it is the emperor's. Jesus completes the point when he says that they are obliged to “render to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's.”

One commentator said about this lesson that the person of faith “should owe Caesar nothing, because everything (of consequence) belongs to God. However, if you are going to participate in the economy of Caesar, then you're going to have to pay taxes, and play by the emperor's rules.”

To go back to the beginning of Jesus' teaching in this chapter, the vineyard has been sullied. God created a habitat built upon honor of God, as well as on love and fair treatment between all the inhabitants of the vineyard. However, when some take advantage of others, what is "owed" to the Creator can never be fully given in honesty. Unfortunately history has shown that anyone--prophets, saints, even the heir of the kingdom--who comes to repair, restore, reconcile, and renew the "vineyard" is met with resistance. The gravitational pull of power wins out over the ethics of communal well-being -- most of the time.

But that's not how God wants it. That's not what the Creator of the vineyard intended after creating a fertile place for growth to happen. I LOVE Jesus' adapted parable because it assumes the "grapes" (that is, God's people) are just fine - they are prepared to grow just as the one who planted them intended. As long as they are tended to with love and with care they can be quite the blessing. Do you hear? **As long as we are tended to with love and with care we can be quite the blessing!**

This is one of the wonderful things to come out of the Coronavirus scare. So many people are putting into place the necessary measures to ensure the well-being of the WHOLE community, especially those who are most vulnerable. We are being required to reprioritize what we value, and if that leans towards restructuring our activities for the good of the whole, then we may find some redemption in the midst of trying and chaotic circumstances.

I'm holding 7 pages of community groups who have been supported by our denomination's Committee on the Self-Development of People, or SDOP. SDOP was founded 50 years ago when decisions were made at a General Assembly to commit monetary support, as I mentioned before, to the repair, restoration, reconciliation, and renewal of economically poor, oppressed, and disadvantaged people. For just as Jesus was working to overturn a system that was blinded by the shiny glitter of power and prestige, the Presbyterian Committee on the Self-Development of People has worked over these 50 years to change the structures that perpetuate poverty, oppression, and injustice. SDOP only supports groups of people who are committed to working together, as a group, to improve the well-being of their community. These pages include vignettes of varieties of organizations that have organized to rebuild the vineyard the way God originally intended.

If we had gathered together, I would have handed out a note card with each of the organizations on them and asked you to learn about the group and then to pray for it. What I will do is upload the pages for you to choose a group (or groups) for you to hold prayer. Or, if you would like for us to mail out a notecard, let the office know, and we will do so! The support for this ministry comes from the One Great Hour of Sharing Offering which we are collecting during the season of Lent, culminating on Easter Sunday.

These, representing the stones that have been rejected, are the chief building stones on which God's vineyard is being rebuilt. Friends trust and believe that "this is -- and will continue to be -- the Lord's doing, and it is amazing in our eyes." Thanks be to God. Amen.