



“Vineyard Issues”

Text: Mark 12:1-12

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FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH - EVANSVILLE, INDIANA

The temptation for the day, for me, is to put our readings from Mark’s gospel on hold and address the elephant in the living room. But, feeding the abnormalcy of these any more than we already have seems counterproductive. If this were just another Sunday morning, you and I would be moving forward in our readings from the Gospel of Mark. So, let’s pretend that this is a normal Sunday.

Jesus is back to telling stories again - known as parables. This parable is about a vineyard, a vineyard owner, a host of messengers, and the vineyard owner’s son. As parables go, that’s quite a cast of characters.

And the moment Jesus started speaking about a “vineyard,” his audience knew exactly what he was talking about. The minute you start talking about vineyards, you are talking about God’s people. This is not a story about a hillside covered with vines. One purpose of this story is to talk about the relationship between God and God’s people.

The vineyard owner does not live near the vineyard. Tenants are tending the vines. When the harvest time comes, the owner sends a slave to retrieve what the owner was due - the owner’s share of the harvest.

But the tenants attacked the slave and beat him and sent him away with nothing. The owner sends another slave. Same treatment. Again and again, the owner sends servants to recover what the owner was due. Like canaries being sent down a mineshaft, the vineyard owner keeps sending messengers. And, one-by-one, they are beaten and some are killed. And nothing of the owner’s rightful possession is returned.

Finally, the owner decides to send his own son, figuring that surely

he would be respected and honored. But, not so. The owner's son is beaten, killed, and his body thrown out of the vineyard.

Now, just for a moment, let's deal with some uncomfortable issues.

First, there is nothing comfortable about this parable. The violence with which the owner's messengers are met is unsettling. We don't like stories about violence and we dislike them even more when we find them in the pages of a Gospel. The violence that is inherent in the story is troubling.

Second, there is a reality being communicated that we might not hear in exactly the same way as Jesus' original audience heard it. That audience knew the trouble with absentee landlords who demand large percentages of the profits from the people who actually do the work. The question of justice is raised and the one who is unjust may be the vineyard owner, or the tenants - depending on how you approach the story.

Finally, when you look at where this story appears in Mark's gospel, it is placed between the Triumphal Entry and the Crucifixion. Don't forget: we are on the road to Jerusalem with Jesus and his disciples and Jesus has no illusions about what awaits him there. And, as if that were not enough, Jesus is telling this story in the presence of those who have the authority to hasten his exit. Jesus is not evading the power of the leaders nor currying their favor. He is up in their face - boldly and without apology. The story is about the conflict that is already boiling between Jesus and the religious authorities.

In Matthew's gospel, we read of Jesus lamenting when he sees Jerusalem. It, too, follows Matthew's telling of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem. But Jesus, like an unwelcome messenger, nearly weeps over Jerusalem.

“Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets
and stones those who are sent to it!
How often have I desired to gather your children
together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings,
and you were not willing!” (Matt. 23:37-39)

God's messengers - the prophets - have not been well-received in the past. Truth be told, prophets are seldom well-received. Those whose words are intended to call us back to God's way and away from the pleasant paths of perdition that we frequently tread are seldom given a hero's welcome.

And Jesus sees himself in that same situation. Placing this parable on a large screen - a screen that includes such issues as God's intention, God's judgment, and even the end of the world - Jesus quotes the Psalm:

“The stone that the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone;
This was the Lord’s doing,
and it is amazing in our eyes.” (Psalm 118:22)

That statement only makes sense if you know the whole Jesus story. Like the son of the vineyard owner, who was mistreated, killed, and his lifeless body cast out of the vineyard - Jesus will be mistreated, killed, and his lifeless body laid in a borrowed tomb. Mark’s gospel is clear about that. Nothing secretive about that.

In her commentary on this parable, Angela Dienhart Hancock writes: “In the parable, the father is outraged, the son is dead and unburied, but the ‘cornerstone’ interruption says the story isn’t really over. Not by a long shot.” No, the story isn’t over. There is a surprise ending to this story - and, by God’s good grace, we will be together to celebrate the surprise.

Here’s the good news for the morning: just when we think we have silenced God, or found a way around God, or presumed to assert an authority over God - God surprises us in ways we could never anticipate. The good news is that we hardly ever have the last word. That word is reserved for God. The good news is that, even when the news is bad, even when we are living through difficult and demanding days, even when we can’t buy a roll of toilet paper to save our souls - God has the last word.

And God’s last word is always - always - better than we can imagine.
Better than anything we can imagine.
For now and evermore. Amen.



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