

The Parable of the Wicked Farmers Mark 12:1-12

There is a portion of the Gospel of Mark where it seems there is nothing but conflict between Jesus and the temple authorities. Every time you go to a new chapter, there seems to be more confrontation.

Jesus has just cleared the temple. He has endured the repercussions. He has just done some preaching about prayer. And the Jewish authorities, the chief priests, the scribes and the elders, once again, challenge him –

“Who gave you the authority to say and do the things you do?”

Jesus turns it around and challenges **them**. They do not answer.

In today’s passage he speaks to them in a parable. This did not happen. It is a story. But it is a story that makes a point. His listeners could not help but know that it was a pointed attack on the religious authorities of the day and on Jesus’ own people.

Have you ever been to a vineyard? Vineyards used to be quite mysterious and exotic. For the most part, we only heard of them from friends who had travelled to Italy or France. (Slide #1) It seems that now, they are popping up all over the place. I even know of two close to our cottage.

Let’s take a look at today’s passage. A man plants a vineyard. He puts a fence around it. He digs a pit for the wine press. He builds a watchtower. When it was ready to start producing, the owner leased the vineyard to some people. Then, he leaves the country – probably off to travel the world on the money generated from his tenants. The time came to collect his rent. He is still out of town. He sends someone in his employ to drop by and collect the rent he was owed. His tenants were not the lovely people they had appeared to be when they applied to rent the place. They beat the owner’s hired hand and sent him away. The next one who came by to collect the rent for the owner was beaten and killed. And on and on it went. The owner was running out of staff people. He decided to send his son. Surely they would not harm him. But the tenants had another idea, “This is the owner’s son, the heir to all of this. If we kill him, all of this will be ours!” And so they did.

Jesus turned to those who were listening. What do you think the owner will do? He will come and destroy the tenants and give the vineyard to others.

To the Jewish authorities who were listening, Jesus turned and asked, “Have you heard this Scripture – the stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone?”

The Jewish authorities did not have to be brainiacs to know that this story was about them. They were the horrible tenants. It angered them. They wanted at least to arrest him but they feared the reaction of the crowd. But this fight was far from over.

What is it like for you 2,000 years later to hear this parable? In good faith, this man rents his property to these tenants. They seem like fine people and will treat his property well. They not only refuse to pay their rent, they beat and/or kill the owner's staff who go to them to collect on his behalf. In the end, they even kill his son. How does this story make you feel? Angry, disappointed, indignant. What rotten people those tenants were! Awful in fact.

But His listeners knew what we might miss. They knew Jesus was talking about them. This story was about how they were being God's people. This story was about how they abused their opportunity and privilege. This story was about their greed and their selfishness. It was about injustice and their inhumanity to others.

2000 years later, how do we hear this story. Is the message of this parable directed to those Jewish authorities, the scribes, the priests, the people of the church way back then?

Lent is a time of self - examination. I wonder how courageous you are feeling. I wonder if, as objectively as possible, you might hold this story that Jesus told, up to yourself like a mirror. It is a story about greed. It is a story about dishonesty. Injustice. Cruelty. A story about abuse of power – abuse of someone's kindness and generosity. It is a story about treating others terribly.

It is very uncomfortable to even consider that the worst of this story might, in some small way, relate to us – the way we think or act or live.....even in the privacy of our own heart and mind. We don't want to even entertain the thought that this parable might have anything to do with us.

Right now, in our culture there are all kinds of 'movements'. People are taking a stand against racial, sexual, and gender discrimination. Students are mobilizing millions to take a stand against the proliferation and use of firearms. Millions are speaking out against injustice wherever they find it.

Abuse of power. Selfishness. Meanness. Greed. Bullying. Acts of prejudice.

In this Lenten time of self-examination, are you guilty of any of these things, or others equally hurtful?

If perhaps you are not guilty of these things, are you guilty of seeing these things in action and not taking a stand against them?

Did you know that if you and I are walking down a street and I throw a rock through someone's window, that in the eyes of the law, if you did not try to stop me, you are as guilty as I am?

It is so much more comfortable to read this passage from afar. It was a story about some people, long ago and far away who acted very badly. Jesus was scolding the church authorities and saying that this story applied to them. It is much more comfortable to leave it there.

I encourage you during this Lenten season, to take some time for some self-examination. You are blessed. You are a child of God. You are loved. How are you doing with all you have been given? The time, talent and treasure that you have at your disposal.....how are you doing with all of that? Where are you getting a pass.....and where do you need to improve?

We are getting closer and closer to the cross....the place where Jesus left it all.....for you.....for me....He gave up everything...even life itself.

I hope that you will spend some time reflecting, examining.....maybe even being brave enough to have a conversation with someone who know you and loves you. How are you being a blessing with all you have been given? How could you let your light shine even brighter?

As you move through Lent, moving closer to the cross....may you be aware of God's presence with you along the way.

Amen