

An Invitation to Confess¹

Jesus spoke to them in parables. “A man planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a pit for the winepress, and built a tower. Then he rented it to tenant farmers and took a trip. When it was time, he sent a servant to collect from the tenants his share of the fruit of the vineyard. But they grabbed the servant, beat him, and sent him away empty-handed. Again the landowner sent another servant to them, but they struck him on the head and treated him disgracefully. He sent another one; that one they killed. The landlord sent many other servants, but the tenants beat some and killed others. Now the landowner had one son whom he loved dearly. He sent him last, thinking, They will respect my son. But those tenant farmers said to each other, ‘This is the heir. Let’s kill him, and the inheritance will be ours.’ They grabbed him, killed him, and threw him out of the vineyard. “So what will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and destroy those tenants and give the vineyard to others.

Haven’t you read this scripture, The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. The Lord has done this, and it’s amazing in our eyes?” They wanted to arrest Jesus because they knew that he had told the parable against them. But they were afraid of the crowd, so they left him and went away.

Mk. 12:1-12 (C.E.B.)

If you’ve been reading Mark – and paying attention to the scriptures we’ve been reading since the first of the year – you may have noticed that we skipped a chapter between last week and today. In the chapter we skipped, we watch Jesus enter Jerusalem on what we typically consider “Palm Sunday.” We will read that text in a couple of weeks ... when it is Palm Sunday!

But I wanted you to realize where we are, to recognize the larger setting of today’s story. We are not only in Jerusalem; we are also approaching Passover. This is probably Tuesday of Holy Week. And the leaders have already become .. suspicious? .. worried? .. skeptical? .. concerned about Jesus and what he is up to.

On Monday, he had overturned the tables in the temple (Mk. 11:15). Today Jesus returns to the city and the religious leaders confront him, challenging his authority to say what he has been saying, to do what he has been doing (Mk. 11:28). You see, they are trying to maintain the status quo. They also recognize Jesus as a threat. They are trying to find a way to stay in control of the situation.

In response, Jesus tells them a parable.

(Read Mark 12:1-9 again)

The parable begins in a way that might remind his audience of a parable Isaiah tells, but then it takes a different turn (Is. 5:1-7). Isaiah’s parable chastises the people of Israel. When Jesus reframes it, the focus is not on the people, but on those who have authority, to the leaders of the people.

In Isaiah, the crop fails; in this parable, it’s the tenants who fail.

Jesus is making a provocative statement that challenges those who have been challenging Jesus.

I don’t know how they responded, but I can make some guesses. My guesses come from listening to this parable and thinking about myself. I wonder what kind of a vineyard God has left for me to tend. I can think of four different vineyards. What kind of a tenant am I in God’s sight?

¹ There is no children’s sermon this week since the choir is singing.

1. I've been given a family, for example. How well do I care for my family? How and where and when do I bring my family to God as an expression of my gratitude? What kind of a tenant have I been?
2. When we began building a home in El Dorado three years ago, I knew a part of being a resident there meant investing my time and energy in that community. How has my presence there made it a better place to live? In what ways have I given back to the community as I honor the God who calls me to "promote the welfare of the city" (Jer. 29:7)?
3. I've also been given the gift of being a citizen of this country, by birth. How have I responded to the opportunities I have, and how have I used my privilege to stand with those whom God cares about, people harmed by our government's actions and policies? What kind of tenant have I been?
4. And I've received a vocation from God, a calling to a specific ministry. Right now, that is being lived out here at Hope Mennonite Church. It is a different calling than I've had before, primarily because I know I am an interim, not a settled pastor. How faithful have I been to God in tending the garden in which I've been placed? How and when and where have I turned over the fruit of that garden?

Four different vineyards. What kind of a tenant have I been?

Maybe you have similar vineyards. Maybe you see your workplace as a gift of God. Or you could see relationships from that perspective. Maybe your home, your farm, your car. What kind of a tenant have you been? When the time has come to return God's portion, how well have you done?

When I'm honest with myself, I realize there have been times when I've been exactly like the tenants in this parable. I've been more concerned about what I'll gain, how I'll benefit, what profit I can make. And not often enough, have I recognized that my purpose is to glorify God and to offer back the gifts I've received.

What about you?

I know there are other ways to hear and understand this parable. You probably have your own understanding based on how you hear it. Like all good stories – and perhaps good sermons – this parable invites us to explore its meanings from the context of our own lives and circumstances, each of which is unique.

- Some might hear this parable as a warning to the church which has received the story of salvation. There are people who would rather hoard the wonderful gift we've received than share it with everyone – or anyone.
- Some might hear this parable as an indictment against the leaders of the church who have sought their own comfort rather than caring for the people they've been called to lead and care for.
- Others could hear it as an allegory about the people of Israel who chase after other gods, refusing to listen to the prophets God sent, and even denying God's own son the opportunity to address them with authority.

Sometimes we choose to hear it from one of those perspectives to protect ourselves from being implicated in the story. We can make it about someone else's sin rather than our own.

It is worth noting that this parable is recorded in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. It also appears in the Gospel of Thomas, a gospel not accepted as Christian scripture, but which has helped scholars better understand the cultural context.

And it's important to remember that each gospel writer tells the story in their own way, each revealing how they hear the story. And each tells it for a specific reason.

I think it's safe to assume that Mark intends it as an indictment against those who are in positions of leadership – both religious and political. I say that because his telling of the story is immediately followed by another image. That metaphor makes his understanding of the parable very clear – so clear, in fact, that it often taints our own hearing of the parable.

(Read Mark 12:10-12)

Mark makes it clear that this is not just about the failure of the tenants to turn over what belongs to the owner of the vineyard. It is also about their intentional disregard for the landowner's son (Mk. 12:8). Mark is pointing to the obvious: that Jesus is being rejected. As he shifts metaphors, Mark begins to talk about Jesus as the keystone, the cornerstone, the one whom religious leaders of his day refuse to recognize but whom God has carefully chosen.

The good news is that God takes the tragedy of the death of Jesus and turns it into the cornerstone of our faith. God transforms his death and creates new life out of it. Jesus becomes the keystone in the doorway to the new vineyard, the new temple, the very presence of God.

Rejecting the cornerstone results in an indictment on the religious leaders who are leading the people away from the God of Israel.

But I think there is a danger for us in hearing it this way, to hear it as if this is only about their sin. The vast majority of Mark's original audience are hearing the story of Jesus for the first time. They likely hear in this parable an accusation that they are blindly following their leaders. They simply cannot point a finger at the leaders without seeing how three fingers point back at themselves.

With that in mind, I'm inviting you to hear the parable as if we are the tenants, as if we are among the guilty. Let's allow ourselves to experience the judgement of God as we point out the fault of the tenants and bring upon ourselves their punishment.

- There are some who tell us that this parable is about Americans who have hoarded the wealth of the world and left many people impoverished.

As Americans, let us confess our sin.

- There are some who will hear in this an indictment against our church when we place a priority on rituals and traditions rather than making room for something new.

As Christians, let us confess our sin.

- Others hear it as a warning that it is easy to become so self-serving and self-centered that we forget the God who has given us the gift of life.

As forgetful people, let us confess our sin.

Turn with me now, if you will, to number 901 in your hymnals. Join with me in this responsive prayer of confession. (Follow with silent prayers of confession.)

Please turn in your bulletins to read the words of assurance responsively.

I'd like to add one more thing about Jesus' parable. I think it is important to remember that God has placed a great deal of trust in us to give us the vineyard. Let us be faithful at tending God's vineyard. Clearly, we are God's beloved people.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

Lenten Communion:

The Worship Commission has invited us to celebrate communion each week during Lent as a community discipline. Each week we will offer a variation in how it is served as a means of exploring different facets of our celebration.

Today, we will be dipping the bread in the cup, a technique often referred to as intinction. We dip it remembering Jesus' words to the disciples that the one who dips the bread in the cup is the one who betrays him (Mt. 26:23). Like Judas, none of us deserve to be here today, we have all sinned, we have all betrayed Jesus. And at the same time, we remember with thanksgiving, that Jesus welcomes us to this table.

I may have told you about my experience of communion several years ago. Bishop Woodie White began by suggesting that the only thing the Disciples had in common on the night of the Last Supper was that they were all sinners. Judas betrays Jesus, but so does Peter.

So, if you have ever found yourself turning your back on God, if you have ever found yourself calling on God's name in vain, if you have ever found yourself engaging in something like a white lie, if you have ever found yourself wishing you had a car like your neighbors, or wanting a nicer house to live in, if you have ever not kept the Sabbath, if you have ever sinned – then you are welcome at this table.

We will invite you to gather at tables, in groups of 6 to 8. For our visitors, the tables are in the back of the sanctuary. If the table is full, it's OK. There will be more than one group of people at each table.

Randy L Quinn
Hope Mennonite Church

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² This is Matthew's telling of the same parable.