

“Rejecting”

Valley Presbyterian Church – March 10, 2024

4th Sunday of Lent

Psalm 107:1-9, 17-22

Rev. Dr. John Wahl

Mark 12:1-12

Introduction

First, let's remember where we are. In Mark's gospel, Jesus entered Jerusalem – at the onset of Holy Week – at the beginning of chapter 11. In just a few short days, Jesus will be betrayed and arrested, tried and crucified.

Second, let's take note that the theology of Mark's gospel is apocalyptic. Mark believes that history is divided into two distinct ages: 1) the present evil age that God will replace with 2) a new age (the realm of God)) in which all things manifest God's purposes. Mark believes that this transition to a new age – a new, redeemed world – is coming soon.

Mark wrote his gospel about 70 CE, four decades after the events of Holy Week, when the Romans had surrounded and captured Jerusalem, destroying the Temple. Mark sees this as a sign that the final apocalypse – the transition from one age to the other – has come near.

Read Mark 12:1-12

Today's reading – the Parable of the Wicked Tenants – is told in the Temple and in the presence of the Jewish leadership: the chief, priests, scribes, and elders. Mark believed that many Jewish leaders had allied themselves with evil forces. The Temple had become a symbol of these misguided leaders; and, thus, the destruction of the Temple was a sign of God's judgement. In the coming realm, those in power on earth – Roman or Jewish – would be replaced; the risen Jesus would become the new Temple in a new age.

Some believe the Parable of the Wicked Tenants gives a narrative theological explanation for why these developments took place; that God rejected the Jewish leadership and they have been replaced with Jesus and his followers. In

a time of social and political chaos, Mark used this parable to assure his congregation they will have a place in the vineyard by following Jesus and being committed to the community of the new realm.¹

In this interpretation, the parable is not just about the behavior of the tenants. “What, then, will the owner of the vineyard do?” Jesus asks. The absent landowner sent first one servant, then another to the vineyard to collect his proceeds, but does not seem to care what happens that they are beaten up or killed by the tenants. Naturally, we want the owner to stop sending more enslaved representatives; and we want the tenants to stop torturing and killing them.

Finally, the son – the heir – is sent and he receives the same treatment. Violence touches each participant in the story.²

For Mark, the executed son is Jesus; if the beloved is Jesus, then the lord of the vineyard has to be God. In this reading, the death of Jesus is blamed on the chief priests, scribes, and elders for having killed the heir. In turn, the “others” who receive the vineyard are the Christians into whose charge Israel’s legacy passes. The Jews, disinherited because of their actions, are replaced by Gentile Jesus-followers.

Is this the only way for us to read the parable? Since Jesus pauses to ask the question, “what would the landowner do?” we are invited to imagine our response. This parable describes a power structure that would evoke a variety of reactions depending on the social status of the hearer. Do we identify with the slaves? Then the landowner is reckless and uncaring. Do we identify with the tenants? Maybe they were fighting to overthrow an unjust system. Or do we, instead, identify with the landowner and his son? We would, thus, feel indignation towards the tenants – *how dare they?* – followed by satisfaction – *they are getting what they deserve!* Every one of these reactions is unsettling.³

For Mark’s readers, this setting of a vineyard would have evoked memories of Isaiah, where the people of Israel are described as stewards of the land, expected to produce a fruitful harvest. This is a story not of disconnected tenants, but a community of God’s chosen people. In any community, its members are called to produce good fruits of mercy and justice. As children of God, as followers of Jesus, we are to prepare the soil for the new realm of God to come.

¹ Ronald J. Allen from *WorkingPreacher.com*

² Amy-Jill Levine, *The Gospel of Mark: A Beginner’s Guide to the Good News*, p. 102

³ Angela Deinhart Hancock from *WorkingPreacher.com*

Over the past six weeks, a number of us have studied Amy-Jill Levine's *The Gospel of Mark: A Beginner's Guide to the Good News*. In her exposition of this text, Levine says this: "Ideally, we provide good fruits not because that is the right thing to do and not out of fear of punishment." (p. 100) By refusing to welcome the landowner's emissaries, the tenants of the vineyard – this community of God's people – fail to live up to its calling.

Thus, rather than simply be unsettled by all the violence present in this story, Levine suggests that "We can read the parable as prompting us, with each step the owner and tenants take, to ask what other steps could have been taken." (p. 106) Where were the opportunities for welcome, mercy, or forgiveness? What opportunities for negotiation or reconciliation were missed? How could members of this community have behaved more like Jesus? What could they have done to help usher in the new realm Jesus announced?

Throughout this study, participants were prompted by Levine to ponder the question, "Who is this Jesus?" On this (projected) slide, you can see some of the responses: *Teacher, gatherer, healer, storyteller*, as well as, *builder, sower, disrupter*. Here, in Jerusalem, in the midst of Holy Week, we see some of the many sides of Jesus who both confronts the systems of power and corruption around him yet fails to resist arrest and willingly goes to the cross.

The question, "who is this Jesus?" has a companion, "what is the good news?" Again, the answer here is multi-faceted. In the gospels, the good news of Jesus Christ is compassion, mercy, and love; it challenges injustice and creates deeper relationships. It is both personal and involves community. We believe that the church – the body of Christ – has been called to bear this good news of Jesus to the world by what we say and do; in all the ways members and congregations bear good fruit as stewards of God's vineyard.

This week, members of this church will again travel to Montreat Conference Center to receive further training in Thriving Congregations. For almost two years now, we have been working to discern how Valley might best *deepen connections within the church* and *widen relationships with our community*. Using community organizing tools, we have been engaging in conversations within and beyond the walls of our church, inquiring how we might best bear the fruit of good news and help usher in this new realm of God.

We are now at the point of choosing and testing out one or two, maybe three ways that we might best extend who we are within this church beyond our walls;

sharing our blessings in order to be a blessing for others. So, before we go, we'd like to take one more opportunity for conversation. Please find one person so that, in pairs, you can discuss this question. *What aspect of / message about our community do we need to take outside of our doors?* Let's now take four minutes; two minutes for each person to speak...

Thank you. Please feel free to write down what you discussed and leave it in the offering basket; or you can contact someone from your Thriving Congregations team. We look forward to sharing more with you about what we learn and discern upon our return.

Today's offertory song is "Called to Tend the Vineyard" written by local musician Christie Dilisio and performed by the Holy Angels Church choir. Thank you again to all of you who have been sending in photos from your *Local Pilgrim* journeys, looking for God at work in neighborhoods and communities near and far.

Indeed, we are called to tend the vineyard; we are members of a community, within and beyond the walls of this church; and we are tasked with sharing the good news of Jesus Christ in all we say and do. Amen.