

3 Lent
February 28, 2016
Poulsbo
Pastor Alison Shane

Mark 12:1-17

Beloved of God, grace to you and peace from God our father, and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

It's only the third Sunday in Lent, but in these readings, it already feels like we're sprinting to the cross. For several Sundays, Jesus has been going along in his ministry wanderings, happily healing people right and left. Now, suddenly, Jesus seems to be doing everything in his power to irk the religious powers that be, the ones who now want to kill him.

After the healing of Bartimaeus, the blind beggar, Jesus immediately started in on the religious leaders, parading into Jerusalem on the back of a colt, with the crowd laying palm branches before him and shouting their hosannas. The next day, Jesus made a big scene in the temple, overturning tables and driving out the sellers and the buyers and the moneychangers, angering the chief priests and the scribes. "Who does he think he is?!" They wanted to kill him, but they were afraid because of his popularity. So they sought to discredit him instead. They grabbed the elders with them and confronted Jesus:

"By what authority do you do these things?"

"Riddle me this, and I'll tell you. Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?"

Uhhh...well...if we say "from heaven," we look dumb for not following John. If we say "human origin," we lose face with the crowd, because they loved him. "We don't know."

(An answer that, in their culture, caused them to lose honor, as well.)

And Jesus tells the parable of the wicked tenants.

A man planted a vineyard, sparing no expense, and taking great care for its growth and security. Then he leased it to tenants and went away. When the season came, he sent someone to collect from the tenants, who apparently had decided that they wanted to own the land they'd been working. It wasn't unheard of for a landowner to go away and never come back, and when that happened, ownership was passed to the lessees. So when the owner sent people to the tenants, the tenants decided to do what they could to gain possession. They beat those sent, they threw them out, they even killed one. Finally the landowner sent his son to deal with them. And they seized him and killed him, too. The landowner was well within his rights to come back and destroy the tenants and lease the land to other tenants.

The religious leaders listening to this rightly understood that they were the tenants. They understood that the vineyard was Israel; this much they knew from Isaiah's song of the vineyard. And they understood the landowner to be God. Landowners and tenants had an interesting relationship. Each depended on the other. The landowner depended on the tenants to work the land diligently and raise good crops. The landowner could have slaves do this work, but when you're out of the country, it's better to have someone else in charge. And ideally, being a tenant gave a sense of pride in the work. Tenants depended on the landlord for their livelihood. They depended on the landlord to provide for them.

But this parable paints a picture of tenants who are greedy. Tenants who forget their purpose. Tenants who forget their place. Tenants who are a little crazy in their dedication to a

bad plan. The religious leaders understood this and instead of hearing in it a chastisement and a call to repentance, they heard in it a threat, and they felt the need to eliminate the threat. They didn't look around and ask what God would have them do instead. They didn't look back to see where they had gone astray. They had come to see the temple, the religious lives of the Jews, and power and authority that they had procured as being their own. To admit that God had called them to a different purpose, to serve the people of God, to care for the land and the people, would have cost them so much.

They understood that if Jesus was allowed to continue, they could have lost everything. They don't recognize that Jesus was right to describe them as tenants who were greedy. Tenants who forgot their purpose. Tenants who forgot their place. Tenants who were a little crazy in their dedication to their bad plan.

Do we see that Jesus is right about us, too?

Because if we are to put ourselves in this parable, it is in the place of the tenants. Tenants who are greedy. Tenants who forget their purpose. Tenants who forget their place. Tenants who are a little crazy in our dedication to our plan.

In this unchurched world, the church itself is God's tenant. All of us. And we as a church have behaved badly, believing that church buildings belong to us, believing that congregations belong to themselves, believing that ministries are for us, believing that the church exists to meet our needs, believing that this earth is ours to do with as we please, believing that the things we stuff into our homes and the money we stuff into our accounts actually belong to us. We hoard, and we build walls to keep others out, and we dismiss the needs and limitations of others, believing that if it's ok for us, it should be ok for them, and we turn our faces away from the neighbor seeking help from us as individuals, as a church, as a community, as a country. And we like how things are, so when God sends someone to change us, we turn that person away, we abuse that person soundly to our friends, we send out heralds of our own to block the voices that cry out for the neighbor and to block the hands who would reach out instead of reaching back to what was, and we cling fervently to our ways.

And Jesus says, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."

We are the tenants. God is the landowner.

The landowner who shares what is his. The landowner who shares leadership and authority and even creative power with his tenants. The landowner who persists with his tenants, who comes again and again and again and again to try to bring them around. A landowner who is a little crazy in his refusal to give up on wicked tenants, who is so bat crazy for his vineyard AND the tenants that he just can't help himself.

This is the God who comes to us in Christ, who bathes us in love, and who calls us once again to be refocused away from ourselves and our own wants and wishes and desires, calls us to work, to remember our place, to remember our purpose.

Because that which the religious leaders of Jesus' day saw as an inevitability because of their sin – the destruction of Jerusalem and the wresting of Israel from their hands – is not our eventuality. Jesus saw to that. As he always does, Jesus turned that eventuality on its head. When we kill him, instead of punishing us, Jesus rises from the dead. Take that! Instead of destroying us, Jesus gives us life. Instead of giving the vineyard to others, Jesus forgives, keeping us in the fold. Jesus draws you in again and again and again and again because he is crazy about you. Crazy enough to give you not only a second chance, but a new chance every day. Forgiven, loved, and saved to be refocused and sent out into the world for the sake of others. How can we make this life better for others? How can we make this church better for others? That is our

vineyard work as tenants. And God has saved and forgiven us so we can get to work.
Amen