

Win

It helps me to say out loud that this is a surreal moment. I am accustomed to seeing your smiling and occasionally befuddled or even napping faces in front of me as I lead worship and preach. That said I am grateful that you are setting aside a portion of your day to worship alongside me and alongside each other even though it feels so different. The world outside our doors is in crisis mode, even in a bit of a panic. And fear is spreading far more quickly than the virus. I for one, need church, need this community even if I cannot hug you or give you a fist bump during the peace. And this seems like an odd text to preach on right now. Wouldn't it be better to just go with some kind of scriptural comfort food? I'm not sure, but we're in Mark right now, and like any good book I feel a need to see it through to the end, so Mark it is.

As it turns out, this morning's passage takes place in the midst of a world gone mad a bit, too. Just ahead of our text, Jesus has entered Jerusalem on a donkey with crowds waving palm branches and shouting "Hosanna!" We are now in Holy Week and will be for the foreseeable future. Jesus has come to the Temple and turned everything upside down literally and figuratively. He and the disciples have left Jerusalem for the night, and now they are back. As you might imagine, the Temple leaders would like to have a few words with Jesus. He has been worrying them and angering them for a while now, but things are coming to a head. At the end of chapter 11, one group of leaders begins to grill him about authority, more specifically: how does he have the authority to do what he does and say what he says? Chapter 12 begins in the middle of this confrontation. [Read Mark 12:1-17]

Before we dive in, I should say that the violence in the text bothers, me, too, and that this text and others like it have been misused throughout the centuries to justify all sorts of horrific anti-Semitic behavior, behavior our Jewish siblings still endure. I want to be clear: that is not what this text is about. At all. If it were, we could hold it at an acceptable distance and write it off, but neither Mark, nor the text, nor Jesus is letting us off that easily.

They want to trap him, Mark tells us. This is not the exquisite leprechaun trap I saw on Facebook this week that one of you built with your kindergarten student. No this trap is much more menacing. The leaders of the Temple are desperate to find a way to catch Jesus in his own words so that they can get him out of the way. He is more than a nuisance. He is a threat to the way they have always done things and to the power they hold. The narrative becomes

a stage play of sorts, where different groups band together and march toward him in different scenes. Each time a group fails they tag team another. It is almost as if they are playing some kind of ominous game. And Jesus remains, right there, center stage meeting each trick question with an answer they did not anticipate.

The first part of our passage gives us a parable, but it is more of an allegory. Just in case you don't have your high school English textbook handy, an allegory is a story where each character or each image is tied directly to something else. It's a one-to-one connection. When the original listeners hear the story, their ears perk up. This vineyard language is familiar. The prophets have long described the people of God as a vineyard. So they know very quickly that the vineyard is the people of God, that the tenant farmers are the religious leaders who have been put in charge of caring for the people, and that the beloved Son is standing right in front of them. The prophets have been preaching against the powerful and their abuse of power for generations. Jesus is not offering anything new here, except for that Son business. The vineyard owner is sending his best hope, his most beloved messenger to urge those tending the vineyard to be faithful to the covenant they have made and to pay what is owed, but the tenants, the religious leaders are in too deep it seems. They have no interest or desire in giving up anything.

I wouldn't be that kind of vineyard owner, I'm afraid, the kind that keeps giving chances. I am stunned and awed that God is. And infinitely grateful, too. Because I've been given a plot to tend, some vines to cultivate. We all have. And I am afraid at times I just want to keep everything for myself. I've kept the weeds at bay. I've babied my grapes and trimmed my vines. It is easy to forget that they are not solely mine. It is easy to forget just who planted them in the first place, who cleared the land and carved out a place for me and mine to grow and thrive. And goodness it is easy to fall into the trap of quibbling with Jesus about what is good and what is bad, who is on the good list and who's on the naughty list. It is so easy to lose sight of who he is and what he comes to do.

We have begun our stay-at-home, flatten-the-curve movie watching. *Knives Out* was on our list this week. No, it is not a movie I would recommend showing at a church movie night, but stay with me. The plot—without giving too much away—involves the family of Harlan Thromby, a wildly prolific and successful murder mystery writer. The story unfolds around his wealthy, spoiled family, Harlan's sudden death, an investigation by a private detective from Louisiana (played by James Bond), and Harlan's nurse, a kind young woman named Marta. During the course of the movie, we learn that Harlan has spent time playing a game called "Go" with Marta and with his grandson, Ransom. "Go" is a game of strategy, where the object is to surround more territory than your opponent.

Marta has a knack for winning, but she has an unconventional approach to playing. She does not play to win; rather she tries to create beautiful patterns on the board. And it works. She focuses on the beauty and on caring for Harlan in an unselfish way. She is grateful for his friendship, and she is grateful for his concern for her and her family. So (minor spoiler alert), he re-writes his will to include only her. And his family is outraged. They feel certain that he owes them this, too. Even though he has given and given and given and given some more. Yet again, Marta was never in it to win it. She was in it, in the relationship for service, companionship, and beauty. And Harlan is grateful. *Knives Out* is no allegory. Harlan is not God and Marta is not Jesus, but it does make me wonder about how often I play the role of the quibbling, petty child, feeling owed everything that has come my way purely as a gift. What kind of game am I playing?

Another group of leaders appears on stage in the last part of our text, and their entire intention is to trap Jesus, to win as if this is all a game. But it is not a game, and Jesus has little patience for their ploys. They sweet talk him and try to butter him up:

‘Teacher, we know that you’re genuine ... [And in the same breath...] ‘Does the Law allow people to pay taxes to Caesar or not? Should we pay taxes or not?’¹

Ok, if they really think Jesus is so terrific, I don’t think they’d be trying to trip him up. But here they go. They want to find a way to rid themselves of him. He is too disruptive, too much of a threat to their nice little lives. This group of leaders missed the earlier vineyard parable I guess, but their trick questions boil down to the same thing: what exactly is God owed? Who gets what? Now I’m not advocating that we stop paying taxes. I for one am a fan of good roads, food safety, firefighters, crossing guards, and the CDC. But I don’t think Jesus is talking about taxes here. It’s not about nickels or dimes or denarii. And it is not a game. The language we have heard for years is “give to Caesar” or “render unto Caesar,” but the original language is more accurately translated as giving back, restoring.² Jesus wants the leaders and the whole people of God to remember who we are and whose we are. He wants to them and us to recognize who it is exactly that we owe our very lives to. He calls them to pay back what they owe. The coin they pull out bears the image of the emperor, and that image likely bears the inscription that proclaims the emperor as the divine son. But the leaders should know good and well that there is nothing divine about the emperor, no more than

¹ Mark 12:14, Common English Bible

² <https://biblehub.com/greek/591.htm>, as pointed out in this podcast: <https://www.pulpitfiction.com/narrative-notes/2-28>

any of them. The truth is that we all bear the divine image—emperors, disciples, leaders, bystanders, and servants alike. And they have forgotten that. Maybe we have, too. Can we fully pay back the one whose image we bear?

I am not looking forward to the distancing we are being called to do for the next while, and yet, I am trying to embrace it as a moment—maybe a very long moment—when I recall and reclaim what is essential, what is important, what we should rightly value, what makes us who we are at our very core. As I have said many times before, we are not our own nor are we on our own. That takes on a different meaning for me now. As I stare down a now almost empty calendar page, I am reminded in vivid Technicolor that I am not my job, my errands, my appointments, my reports, my committee work, or my paycheck. Nor am I my clever answers, my accomplishments, or my wins, especially at the expense of others. I have been given abundant life by One who owes me nothing. And this One has given me everything—vines, grapes, faith, and companions along the way. This One has given me life. And this life, this beautiful, tragic, complicated, exquisite life is a gift of the dearest kind. It is a gift to be shared and savored not a game to be won. “Give back to God what is God’s,” Jesus says. *Give back*. Give back to the God who keeps giving, keeps coming, keeps redeeming, keeps saving, keeps renewing, keeps treasuring, keeps trying to find a way to reach us despite all the ways we insist on breaking his heart. Give back to the God who gives the beloved Son to show us the way of hope, love, justice, mercy and peace, the same beloved Son who gives his very life to save ours. How can we even begin to repay that gift?

When the world around us plays games with compassion and tries to hoard all the things, maybe it is good to be reminded that the God we meet in Jesus Christ does not play games. Instead he gives himself up for the sake of life, beauty, justice, mercy, and love. In him we meet the God who never fails to show up, never fails to give us what we need, never fails to love us, never tries to trick us or lead us astray. How do we repay that? Maybe we can use the days ahead to tend our vineyards, to give thanks for the one who planted them, and to imagine and dream together about how we might begin to try. Sounds like a win to me.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.