

Starting Now

Mark 11:27-12:12, Isaiah 5:1-7

The First United Presbyterian Church of Crafton Heights

January 27, 2019

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*To hear this sermon as preached in worship, please visit
<https://castyournet.files.wordpress.com/2019/01/sermon01-27-2019.mp3>*

As we continue in our exploration of the Gospel of Mark, let me remind you of some things we've already seen. You'll recall that the first part of this narrative contains many scenes of Jesus as a healer, a wonder-worker, and a man who was out amongst the crowds. That time in the Galilee, however, ended when Jesus entered into a time of intentional discipleship with those who were closest to him. Between now and Easter, we'll be dealing with the third major section in the Gospel, his arrival in Jerusalem on the day we've come to call "Palm Sunday" and the events of Holy Week.

Last week we considered a story that might be the "frame" for this whole section – the cleansing of the Temple and the judgment on the fig tree that was a pointed lesson to his disciples on the nature of the religious leaders at that time. ¹Today we'll look at the first of five specific confrontations that follow the day when Jesus ran the money-changers and profiteers out of the temple.



Allow me to begin by making a few observations about the text as we have heard it and then I'd like to invite you to think creatively about the parable.

Jesus and his friends are coming into Jerusalem and the religious establishment asks him, essentially, "Hey, buddy, who do you think you are, anyway?" I find that this

¹ *The Chief Priests Ask Jesus by What Right Does He Act in This Way*, James Tissot (c. 1891)

conversation is in some ways a mirror image of the sacred and powerful time that Jesus asked his disciples, “Who do people say that I am? And who do you say that I am?” Back in chapter 8, that gave those who were interested the opportunity to confess their faith and give voice to their doubt. In today’s reading, however, it’s clear that a group of powerful people who felt threatened or irritated by Jesus were seeking to put him in a position of defending himself.

In reality, though, Jesus turns the tables on them by asking them to recall John the Baptist’s invitation to repentance and forgiveness. Jesus isn’t playing a trick on them here by answering a question with a question: he’s making a serious statement about who he is and what he’s here to do. He’s essentially saying to them, “Look: you’re not going to believe me whatever I say because you’ve already got your minds made up.”

One little twist that our narrator adds is that we are given all of this dialogue in the “historical present” tense – “They say to him... He says to them...” and so on. What that means is that when Jesus looks at them and says, “Answer me!”, he is inviting readers of all times and places to do the same thing. In chapter 8, he asked his first disciples, “Who do you think I am?” Here in chapters 11 and 12 we have the obligation to reflect on that question in a personal way.

And then, even though he says in verse 33 that he’s not going to tell them under whose authority he’s acting, he goes ahead and tells a story that makes it pretty plain.



You may recall last week, when we talked about the fact that there are several places where the Old Testament speaks of Israel as though it were a fig tree. This morning you’ve already heard of Isaiah’s referencing the people of God as a vineyard. And before you get all worked up about mixed metaphors, let me remind you

that if your grandmother called you a peach and your grandfather called you the apple of his eye, you would know in a second that they weren't really talking about healthy snack foods – they were voicing their delight in you.

The “Song of the Vineyard” that begins Isaiah 5 describes God’s disappointment in the crop that has been produced. It ends with a description of the harvest: the Lord had expected justice (*mišpāṭ*), but was dismayed to find bloodshed (*mišpāḥ*); he had hoped for righteousness (*ṣēdāqâ*), but found only moaning (*ṣē‘āqâ*).



²In telling his learned audience a story about a vineyard, Jesus was sure that they would remember this sad song about God’s hopes for his people. In this current version, however, there is a significant change: the owner of the vineyard is now holding those who had stewardship over the property to be responsible. He’s not frustrated or angry at the vines themselves; he’s irate because those who he had trusted to tend and care for and nurture his property were not being faithful in their duty.

And so, as you’ve heard, he sends a series of messengers to set them straight, and they respond violently and ultimately kill the landowner’s son.

It’s easy to jump straight to what might be an obvious conclusion: that Jesus is the son who was killed, that John the Baptist and other prophets were the previous messengers who were treated spitefully, and judgment is coming to all who reject the Son. And if you wanted to say that, I’d award you two points for paying attention and following along.

However, let’s say that you’d like to have ten points, not just the easy two. Let’s dig a little deeper into the story.

² From the *Codex Aureus of Echternach*, an 11th-century illuminated Gospel Book

The tenants are really making a mess of things, and the owner continues to send them opportunities to make it right. However, the tenants continue to escalate the situation until finally they kill the landowner's son.

Think about that for a moment: in what scenario would it possibly make sense for them to murder the son? The landowner is clearly hot under the collar, and he knows that they are there. How would killing the son going to be of any benefit to the tenants?

The only possible scenario in which that makes sense is if the tenants believe that the owner is so far away, so weak, powerless, or so disengaged that they can get whatever quick profit that they can from the land and then get out of town before the owner comes for them with guns blazing.

Do you see what I mean here? The only reasonable explanation for killing the son is that the tenants hope that by the time news of this crime reaches the rightful owner of the property and he comes to execute judgment, they'll have taken anything that isn't nailed down and be long gone.



“But Dave,” you say, still striving for your ten points. “This is not really a story about farmers. It’s a story about God pronouncing judgment on the leadership of the house of Israel for failing to take care of God’s people.”

And I’d say, “That’s brilliant! So in that reading, the leadership believes that the judgment day is so far off that they can go ahead and do what they want as long as they want to do it because God is not really going to act now anyway... Ten points for CHUP!”

So where do we see that in our own world? What is the relevance of these passages to our own lives?

Well, for starters, I'll give you the two point answer again: just as Jesus provided the religious leaders the opportunity to confess their faith in him and acknowledge the power that is rightfully his, so too, we are each invited to place our trust in him and give thanks for the presence we have.

But let's dig a little deeper. Let me ask you to think about some scenarios in our world where people persist in a pattern of behavior because it seems as though any consequences of such action are either minimal or so far away we don't have to care about them.



Let's swing for the fences here – a big, hairy, audacious, ten-point problem... What about climate change and our stewardship of the environment? Is that a spiritual issue? Does the church, do people like you and me, have the responsibility to act because we are accountable to the creator?

And you say, "Oh, come on, Dave... that's too big. That's too complicated. And besides, we'll be dead long before –"

Yep. In other words – it is an issue, and we do have some culpability, but because it's really big, really complicated, we don't have time for something like that. Therefore, it's a pretty good bet that we'll be so paralyzed by the enormity of the situation that we are more likely to leave a mess for our children or our grandchildren.

I'm 58 years old. I have a granddaughter who is 1. Lord willing, Violet will turn 58 in 2076. What kind of world will she and her friends inherit from us? If we continue to act the way we've always acted, then scientists tell us that heat waves that used to come every 20 years will be annual events in 2076. Some models indicate that insects, which are vital for

pollination and therefore for food production, could lose half their habitat by 2075. The beach where my granddaughter went swimming this summer could be under six or ten feet of water in 58 years.

Do I have the right to continue to lay waste to this planet simply because I expect that I'll die before it does? Or does the fact that God set us in a garden, said it was good, and left us in charge imply that I ought to do what I can to be a good steward of that trust so that those who come after me have the opportunity to garden in peace?



Or how about a little closer to home... are there places in your life where things are not great, but you don't see any easy way out and figure that you'll just do your best to ignore it until it goes away or all comes crashing down on you?

Maybe it's a financial issue. You had those student loans, and then the car payment... insurance is a mess... and now you just feel like it's hopeless and so the best that you can do is hide out and numb yourself as you watch the numbers spin and spin and spin...

Or maybe it's more of a personal issue. There's a relationship that isn't the way that you wish that it was, but you're thinking, "You know what? Forget them! All the blood, sweat, and tears I poured out and this is what I get? Never mind!"

Listen, in these cases it seems to me that the call of the Gospel is the same: believe that healing, that resurrection, that change is possible. Believe in the interest and the presence of the Landowner. Believe that the vineyard in which you've been planted is capable of growing fruit, and hold on to your call to be a steward of this earth, your finances, or that relationship. Believe that your life, your

presence has meaning and purpose. Believe that God is close at hand – don't give in to the temptation to believe that God is too far away, or unable to help. Refuse to believe that anything is beyond God's reach.



And then let me encourage you to not only believe, but to act like you believe. Take a step indicating that you think that even though the situation seems dire – it's big, it's huge – it is not the only possible reality.

Can you commit to reducing your use of fossil fuels? Will you look for ways to use less plastic – actually, to use less everything? Can you walk a little more, or encourage your neighbors in some of these processes?

When you get that paycheck, can you prioritize where it will go so that you can think of yourself as someone who is making progress toward financial health?

Maybe you need to pick up the phone or write a short note to one whom you've wronged, and seek to move past some obstacle that has seemed paralyzing to you in the past.

Look, I have a confession to make. I am out of touch

with popular culture. I have never seen or listened to *Hamilton*. I'm not necessarily proud of this, but up until last week, I thought Cardi B was a diet and workout plan. Seriously. But listen: my all-time favorite musical is a really cheesy story – *Man of La Mancha*. If you want, I'll walk



you through the entire plot and even sing you the best songs, but for now let me say that I love that story because Don Quixote de la Mancha is dismissed as a fool, or treated as though he were insane, because he continues to dream about and attempt to do that which everyone around him knows is impossible.

I know that the prevailing wisdom is to hear this parable as one of judgment – to read these verses and think, “Wow, God is really ticked at these people. He’s going to punish them – and he’s going to punish you, too, if you don’t straighten up and fly right.” That’s the easiest way to interpret this parable.

But I think that there is something to be gained in remembering that Jesus did not come so that we would all straighten up and fly right. In the parable, the owner keeps sending messengers and eventually his own child because he can see that the current tenants are bent on overriding and demolishing his intentions for that vineyard. Jesus came so that we would know that God’s intentions are for fruitfulness and for love. Let us rejoice in a God who sent prophets, who sent Jesus, who sent people to us, who sends us! A God who is love over and over and over again! All this, not so that we would fear him, or so that we would hide ourselves or some aspect of our lives from the Lord, but so that we might do the opposite and open ourselves and our lives up to the love for which we were made.

This is grace, friends, and it is for you. Thanks be to God, Amen!