

Message: *“Being good tenants or : The world’s not my oyster”*

Mark 12:1-13 Parable of the ruthless tenants

March 28, 2020

From the child who builds a sandcastle and has a bully come along and trample it down ---to the owner of a flat who renovates it carefully only to have the tenants trash it---almost anyone has had a painful experience like that at some time in their life.

An experience of someone else’s stupidity, disregard for your effort, or sheer spite.. It’s not something you will ever want to go through again.

You will still remember the anger you felt when something like that happened to you. Mark recounts a parable with such a topic:

Planting a a vinyard is a lot of work; it takes years to establish. Just ask the folks around Bear River or Wolfville area!

The vinyard in Mark’s story is rented out to tenant farmers but they forget their place. Tenant farming in Mark’s days meant that the tenant needs to pay the “annual rent” in produce or cash. But the tenants have no intention to do so, and as the out- of- the country-owner sends one messenger after another to collect the rent, they get mobbed. Finally the owner’s son is killed as he attempts to bring the rogue tenants into line.

As always, we can and must read biblical stories on more than one level.

The traditional reading sees the story as a story about God and Jesus: an allegory: The vinyard owner is God, the vinyard is Israel, and the tenants are all who mistreat and abuse the people and the land. The servants are the prophets God has sent over time, and the son is Jesus. As he is killed, God is full of wrath. Severe punishment ensues. Since Mark wrote around the time of the total destruction of Jerusalem and its inhabitants by the Roman army in 70 AD, it is likely that this story may have originated in an attempt to lay blame for the destruction on those who abused their power over the centuries, kings and religious elites, including Sadducees, Priests and Pharisees.

However, as I said: there is more than one level of understanding to every biblical story and in this case the traditional reading has not been very helpful.

This way of reading of the story has led to antisemitic atrocities by Christians in the name of “God”. For centuries populist Christian mobs looted Jewish stores and assaulted Jewish people in Holy week because “they killed our Saviour”. Ironically the brutality of the “wicked tenants” was copied by those who claimed to punish the “wicked” tenants.

O dear. Certainly the story shows something of humans at their worst.

And you may have read it and at first reading shook your head and said “I’m done with such a vengeful God”(even IF you could relate to the landowners anger). And you would be right.

But- before you throw this story on the trash heap of history ponder another reading: This: I see a message for our time in there:

God plants a vineyard.

(In fact, in the 2nd chapter of Genesis God literally plants the world as a garden)

The world is this vineyard.

It took God time to establish, be it via evolution or creation or whatever you believe. It took time and God planted and brought forth something very fruitful. “and God saw that it was good”(Genesis 1:12)

If the entire world must be seen as God’s good vineyard, you, I, and our fellow humans are we not the tenant(s)?.

“The world is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof” Psalm 24:1

But this precisely is the role which many humans are not happy with.

In Shakespeare’s Merry wives of Windsor the character “Pistol” says :

“Why then the world's mine oyster/which I with sword will open.”

Open with sword- that pretty much sums up human conquest of the globe, doesn't it? By sword, by bulldozer, by tanks and guns and taking away the riches. Just look at the Indigenous tribes in the Amazon and Bolsonaro’s systematic take over of their territory and brutal eviction practices, ok’d by the people who elected him. Or look at Canada’s own colonial history for that matter. Reading the parable this way, the destructive end does not surprise. We, the tenants, can not go on in this destructive way of pillaging vineyard earth. There will be consequences.

Already we have all been “sent to our rooms” via an aggressive pandemic. Humanity all over the globe has been told to “stop and think”. At least that is my reading which I share with spiritual people from all kinds of different religions. When we long to get back to “normal” we must ponder what that “normal” should look like.. Humanity can not continue on the trajectory we are on. A new normal must involve less travel and less consumption so that we avoid the worst for the planet and ourselves The world is not my oyster.

It's someone else's' vineyard.

May you celebrate that this coming gardening season and in the way you make plans for your future.

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