

Pastor Colleen Montgomery

Parable of the Tenant - Taxes to Caesar - Mark 12:1-17

8 March 2020

Holy Trinity, Wytheville

I'm a little sister. One of the ways this manifests is that both as a child and as an adult I'm attentive to what candy is mine and what was or is my brother's or my husband's. This came to a boiling point when my husband and I lived in Indiana. I became so mad when Nick finished off a bag of candy without telling me or offering me any. He said to me, "Colleen, do you know that we literally live across the street from a grocery store? Do you know that you're an adult now, and you can go buy more candy if you want?" His words cut through my anger because my answer was no. No, I had not put that together.

Ownership and what belongs to who are things that we all fight about no matter the age. Kids fight over candy and toys. Adults fight over candy and toys. And adults fight over land, property, and this week, even toilet paper. In today's scripture, we see disputes over ownership and Jesus has something to say about it.

Now before we dig into today's stories, I want to make a quick note about the flow of Mark. Several of our churches have been reading Mark sequentially since January. [If you're at a church that hasn't been reading Mark, you could start today and catch up by next week. Reading your bible is an excellent way to connect to God while you might be stuck at home.] Now, we have not read every verse in worship, but we have read everything in order. Today breaks that mold.

This morning we jumped all the way to Mark 12. We skipped over Mark 11. We will return to the beginning of Mark 11 to hear the story of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday in a few weeks. It is important to understand where we are in the timeline of Mark to recognize what is at stake for Jesus in our reading. This is no casual parable or teaching. People have begun to conspire for Jesus' death. The tension is intense and palatable in these verses.

Also, whereas the first ten chapters of Mark move at a breakneck pace, in Mark 11 the pace slows down to a near crawl. Three years of ministry is covered in those first ten chapters. Now Jesus' final week in Jerusalem gets 5 full chapters all to itself. Today's reading and the readings from March 22 and 29 all come from the same day in which Jesus is teaching near to the temple.

Back to the story at hand.

Jesus' main teaching about ownership comes as the answer to a question about taxes. A question that comes from an odd group. The Pharisees and supporters of Herod normally would not have anything in common. They don't share the same religious beliefs or political opinions. However, they have a common goal. They want Jesus gone. Pastor Gary Charles writes, "They are interested in swaying public sentiment in their favor, so they can get rid of this dreamer and see what becomes of his dream. So they set a trap."¹

The trap comes in the form of a question and has two sides. The question is: Does Jewish law allow for people to pay taxes to Caesar or not? The first part of the trap is about the particular type of tax they are asking about. Mark Scholar Bonnie Thurston explains that they are asking specifically about a poll tax. This was a special tax that was paid directly to the emperor on top of other government taxes and temple taxes. This particular tax is a clear symbol of oppression of the Roman Empire. It was paid with a special silver coin called a denarius. Caesar's face was imprinted on it. For a Jewish person to even have this sort of coin breaks a law about having nothing with a graven image on it.

Therefore, if Jesus says yes, they should pay, then he will lose popular support of those who are sick of the oppression of the Romans. He is also endorsing the breaking of the law against having graven images.²

The second side of the trap is connected to the danger that is building up around Jesus. Within the Jewish community the chief priests, legal experts, elders, and leaders within the Pharisees and Sadducees are getting antsy about Jesus teachings. Outside of the Jewish community, the Roman officials are also starting to wonder if Jesus might really lead revolt or uprising of some kind.

¹ Preaching Mark in Two Voices 194

² Thurston 134

Therefore, if Jesus answers no, they should not pay their taxes, he increases his own personal risk. The supporters of Herod would report them to the Roman officials and he would be denounced as a revolutionary.

So what does Jesus do?

Jesus avoids the trap completely with his answer: "Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God." This answer can be interpreted in a few different ways.

At face value, it seems that Jesus is approving the payment of the tax. After all, Caesar's face is on the coin. Clearly it belongs to him, so it is okay to give it to him.

But if you really think about the second part of the statement: give to God what belongs to God, it becomes clear that Jesus is saying something else. When we start to answer: what belongs to God? Jesus' point comes into focus. Because I think the question is better phrased: what doesn't belong to God? The answer to which is nothing.

It is all God's.

Which connects well with one of the themes from the first half of the reading from the parable of the wicked tenants. It is clear by violent actions of the tenants that they do not want to pay the owner of the vineyard what is due. They want the produce and the profits for themselves. But the truth is, that even killing the heir will not change who owns the vineyard. It will still belong to the owner, and he can do with it what he wants.

Despite the trickiness of the trap and the treachery of the tenants, I hope you still heard some good news in there for us today.

It is all God's.

Caesar's face might be on the coin, but God made the silver that coin was made from.

It is God's.

The people might be under oppression of Roman Rule, but God made the people.

They are God's.

The tenants might kill every representative the vineyard owner sends, even the heir, but the vineyard still belongs to the owner.

And if God is the vineyard owner, it is God's.

It is all God's.

After a week when we have watched food and supplies fly off shelves, when schools around the country have closed for weeks on end, when we have more questions than answers about COVID-19, the reminder that it is all God's feels like grace to me.

I am God's. You are God's. Nothing will change that.

So allow me to use my husband's technique in hopes that it can cut through your anxiety and fear,

"Beloved, do you remember that you are fearfully and wonderfully made by an amazing Creator?"

Do you remember that nothing in this life or the next can separate you from God?

Do you know that God is literally always with you?"

In the days and weeks to come, I pray that remembering that we are God's will bring us comfort and assurance amidst the chaos. I also pray that remembering that all that we have, even our toilet paper, is also God's will enable us to take care of our neighbors and those on the margins well. No matter what the days ahead bring, God will hold the world and will continue to show up in the beauty of the earth and in the love of people as we care for one another. We are all God's. Thanks be to God. Amen.