

Mark 12:1-12

Keeping Time: Jesus' Last Week

(based on a book by Marcus Borg and Dominic Crossan, *The Last Week: What the Gospels Really Teach About Jesus' Last Days in Jerusalem*)

Sermon Title: Tuesday

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Chess slide

Do you play chess? My step dad taught me how to play when I was about 10 years old. I was never very good, but I liked being with him. As a beginner, he continued to teach me, as we played, by asking questions like, “Are you sure you want to make that move?” Or, “What do you think I will do if you move that piece there?” It was a long time before I was able to develop any kind of strategy or think ahead to what my opponent might do if I made this move or that.

*I was reminded of these chess matches with my step dad as I studied Tuesday of Jesus' last week. The day is fraught with conflict after conflict, most of it between Jesus and the chief priests, scribes, and elders. This Lenten sermon series is walking us through each day of Holy Week, according to the Gospel of Mark. Also, as a resource, we are using Marcus Borg and Dominic Crossan's Book, *The Last Week: What the Gospels Really Teach About Jesus Final Days in Jerusalem*. It's not too late to order the book!

*I mentioned last week, when we looked at the story of a very angry Jesus symbolically destroying the temple, that “angry Jesus” was a Jesus I could relate to, as opposed to the “let the little children come to me Jesus,” that dominated my Sunday School class as a child. In the stories of Tuesday, there is another side to Jesus that appeals to me. On this day, we see that Jesus was smart, intuitive, and courageous. Tuesday was like a chess match, Jesus’ opponents setting up a series of moves,

hoping to trap him into making the wrong move. Jesus, I believe, understood this and, just as a chess master would strategically plan his next move, Jesus stayed one step ahead of the temple authorities as he moved from one point of conflict to another.

At this point in the week, we will begin to feel, with each confrontation and each incident, an increase in tension between Jesus and the system of domination the temple authorities represented. Time does not permit us to look at each of Tuesday's conflicts in depth, but I would like to try to paint a picture of how the day went, according to Mark.

I want to start by pointing out that Jesus was essentially caught between two groups of people. One group, the temple authorities and their associates, and the other group, "the crowd." "The crowd" in the story was in Jesus' corner. When he entered Jerusalem on Sunday, they placed their cloaks and leafy branches on the road, cheered, and shouted Hosanna. On Monday, Mark 11:18 tells us, "the crowd" was spellbound by his teaching at the temple. On the other hand, that same verse tells us the chief priests and scribes were looking for a way to kill him because they were afraid of him.

We will see in Tuesday's events that the chief priests, scribes, and elders were working to bring about one of two things. They either wanted Jesus to say something so inflammatory that the Romans would have no choice but to arrest him and make an example of him or they wanted him to say something that would make the crowd angry and turn against him. It was dangerous to the people in power for the crowd to hear Jesus' message, believe him, and begin to think that maybe things didn't have to be the way they were.

*I thought about this power dynamic on Wednesday night at the Community Center when the school board held a community meeting about funding for education in Oklahoma. As you know, teachers in

Oklahoma have not received a raise in 10 years, education funding has been cut over and over again...the state is in crisis. Teachers are fleeing the state and the profession to make more money elsewhere and Oklahoma students are the ones that will suffer.

At the community meeting, citizens were invited to share their thoughts about the possibility of a suspension of classes so the teachers would be able to go to Oklahoma City to deliver a strong message to our legislators. Teachers, students, retirees, and parents spoke, including two members of this congregation. All spoke in favor of doing whatever is necessary to bring about change, including suspending classes. In addition, the school board members who spoke were clear that they whole heartedly support the teachers. I left the meeting feeling hopeful. I can't help but think that "the crowd," united around a quality education for our kids might be able to upset the status quo in Oklahoma City. You see, it is dangerous for the ones in power when the people unite. And that is the crux of the tension on Tuesday of Jesus' last week.

Right away on Tuesday morning, the chief priests, scribes, and elders, in the presence of the crowd, asked Jesus, "By what authority are you doing these things?" "Who gave you this authority to do them?" The questions were in reference to Jesus' activities on Sunday and Monday and they were a trap. Instead of answering their questions, Jesus asked them a question, telling them if they answered his question, he would answer theirs.

His question to them was, "Did the baptism of John come from heaven or was it of human origin?" Had they answered "heaven," they would have been accused of hypocrisy as they were not a fan of John's message. On the other hand, if they said John's baptism was of human origin, they risked turning the crowd against themselves. They were afraid of the crowd. Their answer to Jesus' question was, "We don't

know.” Jesus replied, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.” Jesus understood how to play their game.

Following this exchange, he told a parable which was heard by the crowd and by the chief priests, elders, and scribes. This is what he said:

***12** “A man planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a pit for the wine press, and built a watchtower; then he leased it to tenants and went to another country. **2** When the season came, he sent a slave to the tenants to collect from them his share of the produce of the vineyard. **3** But they seized him, and beat him, and sent him away empty-handed. **4** And again he sent another slave to them; this one they beat over the head and insulted. **5** Then he sent another, and that one they killed. And so it was with many others; some they beat, and others they killed. **6** He had still one other, a beloved son. Finally he sent him to them, saying, ‘They will respect my son.’ **7** But those tenants said to one another, ‘This is the heir; come, let us kill him, and the inheritance will be ours.’ **8** So they seized him, killed him, and threw him out of the vineyard. **9** What then will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and destroy the tenants and give the vineyard to others. **10** Have you not read this scripture:

‘The stone that the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone;^[a]

11 this was the Lord’s doing,
and it is amazing in our eyes?’”

12 When they realized that he had told this parable against them, they wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowd. So they left him and went away.

This parable, or a version of it, shows up, not only in the Gospel of Mark, but in Matthew, Luke, and Thomas. They are each a little different and it is likely that the version in Thomas, which is shorter, is the truest to what Jesus might have said. Scholars continue to debate

the meaning of the parable. We could talk for a long while about the differences between how the parable is presented in each gospel and how those versions compare to what Jesus might have actually said. We could also talk for a while about how each gospel writer used the parable and what Jesus actually meant. What's important for us right now is how the author of Mark used the parable.

For Mark, the vineyard was Israel, both the land and the people, and the vineyard belonged to God. The tenants were the wealthy and powerful people, the temple authorities, the ones for whom the domination system was working, who were collaborating with the Romans. They were the ones who wanted the land and the fruit from the land for themselves. The text tells us, “When they realized that he told this parable against them, they wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowd.”

This was the way Tuesday went. In one confrontation after another, Jesus stayed a step ahead of the authorities, and as he did, their fear increased, which made Jerusalem a very dangerous place for him. In the next confrontation it is the Pharisees and the Herodians asking the questions. The Pharisees were all about living out Jewish law to the letter. The Herodians were wealthy supporters of the Herod Family, the royals appointed by Rome. This was *their* question, “Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not?”

Like the question about Jesus’ authority, this was a “no win” question. If Jesus answered no, he could have been arrested as an enemy of Rome. If he answered yes, he risked discrediting himself with the crowd, who were bitter about Roman rule and taxation. Jesus, being a smart guy, didn’t answer the question with a simple yes or no, but set a counter trap.

*He asked to see a coin. Jesus looked at it and asked this question, “Whose head and title are on the coin?” They responded, “The

emperor's." Jesus replied "Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's."

This was brilliant. The crowd saw for themselves that the inquisitors, who were Jewish, were in possession of Roman coins. This was a problem. Remember when we talked about money changers in the temple and how they were necessary in order for the people to pay taxes with the required coinage?

*There were two types of coins. The left side coin, on the screen, is a picture of Roman coinage with the image of Caesar and the idolatrous inscription heralding Caesar as the divine Son of God. The right side coin is a picture of a Jewish coin with no human or animal images on it. The inquisitors' possession of the Roman coins exposed their collaboration with the Roman authorities. They had to have been given that coin by someone who used Roman coinage, certainly not a Jewish peasant.

But back to the question, should they pay taxes or not? Jesus' response, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and give to God what is God's," begs the question, exactly what belongs to Caesar and what belongs to God? The parable of the vineyard reminds us, the vineyard...the land and the people all belong to God. The Roman coin may have Caesar's image stamped on it, but human beings...we have God's image stamped all over us. So, Jesus' point, what belongs to Caesar? The coin. And, what belongs to God? Everything else. Like any good chess player, Jesus set the trap and his opponents walked right into it. Jesus was a master at that. And the crowd was amazed.

This was not the end of the day. Jesus went on to spar with the Sadducees about resurrection; he challenged scribal teaching and the scribes' lack of humility by accusing them of mistreating the ones who were most vulnerable; and he told a story of a poor widow giving all she

had and he contrasted her gifts with the gifts of the wealthy. The crowd was delighted.

Jesus ended the day talking to the disciples, warning them about things to come. These warnings, from Mark to his readers, were of false prophets, war, famine, and great suffering. They were associated with the great war which began in 66 CE and led to the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple. It took the Romans four years to conquer Jerusalem, from the Jewish freedom fighters. The war was a reality as the Gospel of Mark was being written. It was a difficult time for Mark's community and all followers of Jesus. Being followers of Jesus, they were anti Roman imperialism, like the resistors fighting for Jerusalem, but they were also committed to non-violence. This commitment set them apart from the resistance movement and put them in a dangerous spot. All Jews and Jewish Christians were expected to join the resistance and the ones who didn't, risked being killed as imperial sympathizers. Mark warned his audience to flee, rather than taking part in the violence, rather than joining in the battle for Jerusalem.

Mark's call to nonviolence gives us a good reason to talk about violence, specifically gun violence, which is dominating the news and our public discourse right now. In our country today, there is a divide when it comes to guns and gun control. There are people who think all guns are bad and private citizens shouldn't own them. And there are people who think, for the most part, anyone who wants a gun should be able to have one and any kind of gun they choose. These two polar opposites are not the majority of Americans. The majority of Americans support the 2nd amendment *and* think there should be regulation about whether or not certain people should have guns and there should be laws about which kinds of guns private citizens can own. We have got to listen to each other, listen to our children, our teachers, listen to the fear within ourselves. We have to meet in the middle.

I do want to say this about guns, though. Each of us is entitled to our own opinion about them. We can love each other and worship together and disagree about the place of guns in our country and community. However, what we cannot do is say things like, “It’s my God-given right to have a gun.” That is just flat out not true. The 2nd amendment was written by human beings, not God. Our God is a God of peace and lasting peace can never be forced or taken at gunpoint. If we believe the author of Mark, it is clear that the early followers of Jesus were committed to nonviolence and I have to believe the reason for that is that Jesus taught nonviolent resistance. Mark told his audience to flee from violence, not to take part in it. Regardless of what you or I believe about guns, I think Jesus would not have said the answer to gun violence is more guns. A member of this church reminded me this week that the one answer to gun violence, to all violence, is inclusion. All people must know they have a place to belong, a place where they are welcomed. We have to love people. Love is our hope.

Even in the midst of the war, Mark wrote about hope:

²⁴ “But in those days, after that suffering,
the sun will be darkened,

and the moon will not give its light,

²⁵ and the stars will be falling from heaven,
and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.

²⁶ Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in clouds’ with great power and glory. ²⁷ Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.”

The author of Mark hoped and believed Jesus’ return was imminent. 2000 years later, we know that he was wrong about that. Perhaps, we can see Mark’s words here as a call to hope in our own lives though.

*It is clear to me that Jesus had a vision beyond the system of domination and oppression that was his world. He spent his last days

calling out the ones at the top of the system, demanding justice, making it clear that human beings belong to God, not to a ruler. He did these things because he had hope the crowd that was listening and watching would grab onto the vision he was talking about and make it happen. I think God asks us to do the same thing today...to grab on to God's vision of peace, love, compassion, and justice, and make it happen. Amen.