

Facebook Live Worship

Mark 12:1-12

Rev. Kelley L. Becker

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

‘The stone that the builders rejected

has become the cornerstone;

<sup>11</sup> this was the Lord’s doing,

and it is amazing in our eyes?’”

<sup>12</sup> 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 week, in celebration of Earth Day, I want us to talk about some of the ways in which we are connected to the Earth. Boys and girls, I hope you had a few minutes to watch Callie’s video this week. In it, she read a story called *The Great Kapok Tree*. In the story, a man walked into the rain forest to cut down a tree. Before he cut it down, he fell asleep and while he was dreaming, the animals who depend on that tree for their homes, for their food, for their safety, came and whispered in his ear. When he woke up, he chose not to cut down the tree because he realized cutting down the tree would affect the animals, the forest,

and really the whole world, because everyone and everything on our planet is connected, like the links on a chain.

To help us remember that we are connected to the Earth and to everything we share the earth with, let's make a chain, a paper chain. You should all have some strips of paper and either tape or glue. Take a strip of paper and glue or tape it into a loop. Then add another and another. Keep adding loops. I wonder how long your chain will be when the sermon is over. I will check back with you in a while. And...GO!

On July 20, 1969, Neil Armstrong and Bud Aldrin landed on the surface of the moon. In the months leading up to their expedition, the Apollo 11 astronauts trained in a remote moon-like desert in the western United States. The area is home to several Native American communities, and there is a story---or legend---describing an encounter between the astronauts and one of the locals.

One day as they were training, the astronauts came across an old Native American. The man asked them what they were doing there. They replied that they were part of a research expedition that would shortly travel to the moon. When the old man heard that, he fell silent for a few moments, and then asked the astronauts if they would do him a favor.

'What do you want?' they asked.

'Well,' said the old man, 'the people of my tribe believe that holy spirits live on the moon, I was wondering if you would pass an important message to them from my people.'

'What's the message?' asked the astronauts. The man uttered something in his tribal language, and then asked the astronauts to repeat it again and again until they had memorized it correctly.

'What does it mean?' asked the astronauts.

'Oh, I cannot tell you, it's a secret that only our tribe and the moon spirits are allowed to know.'

When they returned to their base, the astronauts searched and searched until they found someone who could speak the tribal language, and asked him to translate the secret message. When they repeated what they had memorized, the translator started to laugh uproariously. When he calmed down, the astronauts asked him what it meant. The man explained that the sentence they had memorized so carefully said, 'Don't believe a single word these people are telling you. They have come to steal your lands.'

(Harari, Yuval Noah, *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*, Harper: New York, 2015, 285-86.)

I first read this story in the book, *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*, by Yuval Noah Harari. Harari used this story to illustrate a point he was making about the effects of colonialism and the "explore and conquer" mentality that seems to drive human beings. Our curiosity inspires us to fly to the moon, dive deep into the ocean, and climb the highest mountains. This zeal for exploration is an important part of being human and it is responsible for so many important discoveries that have cured disease, helped farmers make better use of their land, and provided countless hours of recreation for millions of people. The problem is, that same exploration is also responsible for irreparable damage to the environment, and in some cases, to the creatures we share the planet with.

Human beings have cut down forests, drained swamps, dammed rivers, flooded plains, laid down hundreds of thousands of miles of railroad tracks, and built skyscraping metropolises. The world has been molded to fit our needs, while habitats have been destroyed, causing the extinction of thousands of species. Rather than caring for the Earth as God's representatives, exploring it and cherishing it, we have attempted to conquer it, to the detriment of the Earth itself and all of its inhabitants.

Today's parable about the vineyard owner and the tenants may seem like an odd text to be paired with a discussion about creation care. But, bear with me for a few minutes. The author of Mark placed this story in the midst of the stories

about Jesus' last week. Jesus told this parable in response to religious leaders who had been questioning his authority, specifically, by what authority he disrupted temple activities. That's the story we talked about last week. You will remember the gist of that story was Jesus was trying to make the point that the priests in charge of the temple were supposed to be on the side of the people instead of in cahoots with Rome. Like that story, this parable could be read allegorically as an indictment against the religious leaders. The vineyard symbolizes Israel, both the land and the people, and the greedy tenants are the religious leaders who reject the ways of the vineyard owner, God. You can imagine the tension in the air when the chief priests and elders realized Jesus' story was really about them and their lack of care for what belongs to God.

Since interpreting biblical texts allegorically is part of the Christian tradition, I would like us to try-out a new interpretation of this parable, one that is rooted in the importance of caring for creation. So, once again in the parable, a landowner, who is God, develops property into a vineyard and leaves it in the hands of the tenants. The vineyard is the Earth. This time, though, the tenants aren't the religious leaders. The tenants are all of us. As tenants, we are supposed to use the vineyard as the owner intended and nurture it so that the fruit of the vineyard provides for us and for future generations.

And some of the vineyard fruits should be returned to God by way of using them to care for the ones who are vulnerable. However, instead of sharing the bounty, the rebellious tenants, us, instead harm and destroy the owner's servants and son when they try to collect. So, who do you think is represented by the servants and son? Who is being harmed by the ways in which we overuse, hoard, and damage the Earth? Perhaps, the thousands of species that become extinct each year? Or the whales found starved to death with bellies full of plastic. Or the dead coral reefs or the families who depend on fishing for the livelihood? They are the messengers and we have largely ignored them.

At the end of the story, in a drastic move, the vineyard owner destroys the tenants and the vineyard is placed in the hands of those who will care for it. I

don't think that's how God operates, but based on the evidence scientists are presenting, it isn't hard to imagine how we might destroy ourselves.

This "vineyard" is not meant just for us, or just for some of us, but for our children and our children's children and their children. It is meant for the children of the people who live in the rain forests, for the children who live along the shores of rising sea water, for the children who live in urban areas where the quality of the air is unhealthy, for the children who live near waste sites and water filled with pesticides and industrial waste. It is meant for all the creatures we share this planet with. We are the greedy tenants, rebelling against God, using the Earth to meet our immediate needs and satisfy our own whims, with little regard for the ways in which we, and how our actions are connected to other human beings now and in the future, other creatures, and even God.

Life in the midst of Covid-19 has highlighted the importance of this connectedness. It's visible in cities all over the world like Los Angeles, Phoenix, New Delhi, Paris, Beijing are reporting that the air and water in and around these heavily populated areas are cleaner as a result of shelter in place orders. In New Delhi, for example, residents have seen blue skies, which has become a rarity. According to an NPR report on April 10<sup>th</sup>, the Air Quality Index in New Delhi was 45 in late March. Around the same time last year, the index was 160.

[\(https://www.mercurynews.com/2020/04/11/photos-polluted-cities-see-clean-air-and-water-amid-coronavirus-shutdown/\)](https://www.mercurynews.com/2020/04/11/photos-polluted-cities-see-clean-air-and-water-amid-coronavirus-shutdown/)

Our habits, our way of being in the world drastically affects the environment. It is impossible to deny that.

There is more to this connection than cold, hard facts, though. For many of us, being outside in our yards, walking in our neighborhoods, and even driving through Woolaroc, hoping to get a glimpse of the elusive buffalo, has made this time easier to endure. I don't have a chart or a graph or statistics to prove that being outside, appreciating what God has created, is helping us deal with the

trauma we are experiencing, but I do know it has been balm to my soul. You see, all around us, in our flower beds, on our trees, in rabbit holes, and bird nests, is hope. It is hope that we can see and touch. Right outside our windows every single day is the world that we share, the world we depend on for our food, water, energy, and yes, often, our peace of mind.

Today's parable stands as a reminder to us that the world was not made for us to use with abandon, but to nurture. We are all settling into new ways of being in the world. As we try to figure out this "new normal" we are experiencing, let us re-commit to our role as caretakers of God's vineyard. Might we use this in-between time to set up a system of recycling in our homes, to repurpose that old bookshelf rather than buying a new one or, since we are all cooking more, how about learning more about composting? And let's plant...plant flowers, trees, vegetables, herbs...and seeds of hope that will nurture this planet and, I believe, our own souls. We have been taking land and the fruit of the land for a very long time. It is time for us give. Plant something today.

What about chain makers? How are you doing with those paper chains? Notice that every loop or link in the chain is connected, just as we are all connected to each other, to other animals, to plants and trees, and the planet itself. If you've seen the movie Lion King, you have heard these connections called the circle of life. Keeping that in mind, here's what I want you to do next. If there are other people in your home who have made a paper chain, connect the chains together. Now your chain is even longer. Last, connect both ends of the chain and make a circle, like the circle of life. Let it remind you that everything is connected in this beautiful, wonderful world. Amen.