

## **2020 10 04 – Pissed off Jesus**

### **Matthew 21:33-46**

On Wednesday morning, I asked the group gathered for Lectionary Bible Study if they were familiar with today's scripture passage. They all said, "No." This reading comes up every three years on the lectionary cycle, but most preachers avoid it like the plague and for good reason. Who wants to deal with a parable filled with violence? Not me, at least not until now.

As always, it's helpful to understand the context of this passage. It happens during Jesus' final Passover pilgrimage to Jerusalem. The day before, he entered the temple, turned over the tables of the moneychangers, and called it "a den of robbers." Earlier the same day, on his walk into the city, Jesus cursed a helpless fig tree. Now he is back at the temple teaching a crowd of pilgrims. But the chief priests and elders have come up and are harassing him, asking him what authority he has to teach in the temple.

In response to their question, Jesus tells this story. He tells a parable in which tenant farmers lease portions of a vineyard from a wealthy property owner. When the owner's representatives come to collect his majority share of the grapes, the tenants refuse to pay. Instead they torture and kill the property owner's slaves and then his son. It is a brutal story.

One of things we need to understand is that a large number of the Jewish pilgrims listening to Jesus' story are probably tenant farmers or people of a similar economic class. They know what it feels like to live under an oppressive Roman empire and to give up a unfair percentage of their harvest to absentee landlords. They know what it is like to be a second-class citizen in their own land, to work incredibly hard and still to have barely enough to feed their families.

Jesus' ministry is all about turning that unjust world upside down. He understands and even feels their frustration and their anger. What we have in this scripture passage is a "pissed-off Jesus." I can't take credit for that phrase. I borrowed it from Casey Cross, a Lutheran youth director from Idaho. Three years ago, when she used that phrase in her blog, Casey wrote about all the reasons she was frustrated and angry with the state of her country and her world. She talked about how easy it was to relate with a "pissed-off Jesus."

<https://modernmetanoia.org/2017/09/25/proper-22a-pissed-off-jesus/>

All I can say is that it is still pretty easy to relate to someone who is angry and frustrated about the state of the world. Personally, I struggle with emotions that go back and forth between uncertainty, fear, anger, frustration and sometimes even despair. On this planet:

- we are living in the midst of a pandemic that is killing human beings, eliminating livelihoods and destroying economies and people are still refusing to wear masks; <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/london/grooves-records-anti-maskers-1.5742189>

- we are living in a time when the world's richest 1 percent own 45 percent of the world's wealth (see <https://www.credit-suisse.com/about-us/en/reports-research/global-wealth-report.html>) and people still believe that the capital market is working as it should;
- we are living in a time when our black and indigenous neighbours are being killed because of the colour of their skin and, when they protest that their lives matter, white people have the gall to respond "all lives matter.". <https://www.cleveland.com/entertainment/2020/06/saying-all-lives-matter-doesnt-make-you-racist-just-extremely-ignorant.html>
- we are living in a time when our earth and our very existence is threatened by climate change and people (especially those with wealth and power) still deny it is real. <https://www.beforetheflood.com/explore/the-deniers/top-10-climate-deniers/>

Like Jesus, we have lots of reasons to be angry and frustrated, lots of reasons to be pissed off.

When he was pissed off, Jesus responded by telling a parable, a parable that described an unjust situation that the crowd of farmers and other peasants would immediately recognize. But there were priests and elders also listening to the same story. These were people of status and wealth, people who would, most probably, identify with the absentee property owner. When he was finished his story, Jesus asked, "What do you suppose the owner of the vineyard will do to those tenants?" The priests and elders replied, "The owner will bring that wicked crowd to a horrible death and lease the vineyard out to others, who will see to it that there are grapes for the proprietor at vintage time."

In Jesus' time there were many Jewish people who believed that violence was the only way for them to attain their freedom from an oppressive regime. There were probably people in the crowd that were silently applauding the actions of those wicked tenant farmers. Through this parable Jesus teaches the crowd that protesting with violence is not the answer. For all angry and frustrated people, this brutal story is a reminder that violence begets violence

At this point I expect that the priests and elders are feeling pretty self-righteous, sure in their "eye-for-an-eye", "tooth-for-a tooth" response. But this "pissed-off Jesus" is about to turn their world upside down. He says, "the kingdom of God will be taken from you and given to people who will bear its fruit." Jesus explains to the leaders that actually they are the tenant farmers in the story and that the property owner is God. It is the Jewish leaders, the priests and the elders who are torturing and even killing all the messengers that God has sent, all God's prophets, including Jesus himself, "the cornerstone that the builder's rejected." These religious leaders are the ones who are unable or unwilling to bear the fruit of God's kingdom

As we all know, God's kingdom is a place of peace and justice. The only way to build God's reign on earth is to live our lives as Jesus lived his. The only way to bear the fruit of God's kingdom is to live lives filled with love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

Yes, we have many reasons to be pissed off. This week the main one that stands out for me is the bullying actions and the racist words of the current President of the United States during Tuesday night's debate.

But it is important to remember that there are many peaceful and productive ways that we can channel our anger and our frustration in order to respond to injustice in our world. With that in mind, I want to end with the words of Dr. Simran Jeet Singh. Dr. Singh is Sikh; he is also an activist, a writer, and an educator. These words were published only two day ago. In part, he wrote:

After our family was infected by and survived COVID-19, I said to my partner that I wouldn't wish what we had gone through on anyone. ...

Now that President Trump has tested positive for the coronavirus, I am channeling this memory as a way to summon the appropriate sympathy for a man who so rarely shows it to others in his public life ...

There's something about staring death in the face that can lead us to soften our hearts and re-evaluate our life choices. For me, that meant challenging myself to live in accordance with my priorities, and specifically, making time for the relationships I cherished most in my life...

I am not here to convince anyone to pray for the president or to judge anyone for wishing him ill. What I do know is that there are a number of potential outcomes that feel sinister. One outcome we can hope and pray for is this: May the experience of enduring COVID-19 soften Mr. Trump's heart and cause him to lead with more compassion and kindness in the future. <https://broadview.org/donald-trump-covid-19/>

And to that I say, Amen.