

What Happened to the Grapes?
Mark 12: 1-12

For all that I can be passionate about certain issues, I have always detested violence in all forms. Maybe it's because, in my life, I have witnessed way too much violence and its deleterious effects on those I love. I was never one for *Rambo* or *Terminator* movies. Count me out when it came to *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* or *Freddie Kreuger*. I didn't care for the shoot-em-up Westerns of television in my childhood, and I certainly do not at all like the military-style massacres that are part of our entertainment world today. The world has enough of all that without my holding the door open and letting that violence into my head and heart. Yet violence is an all-pervasive presence in life today as it has been from the beginning of time. This parable from Mark's gospel is violent, gruesome, filled with assault, bloodshed and death. Hidden deep inside all the frightful gore is a tiny kernel of grace, a hope that can and will blossom into God's community. Admittedly, however, that hope can so easily become lost in the darkness of Jesus' lesson that day.

Jesus and the disciples were now in Jerusalem where, except for one brief trip just to the outside of town, he would remain until his death. As this 12th chapter opens, the disciples are in the background while Jesus is in heated conversation with the chief priests and scribes, the leaders of the faith. This Jesus was a no-holds-barred Messiah, one who bravely confronted authority, who challenged and engaged them in matters of law and faith, who loudly condemned their hypocrisy and negligence. With each attack of them, he drove in the nails that would lead to his inevitable death. The parable Jesus told that day was thinly veiled, a not-so-subtle criticism of those same leaders who had been entrusted with the lives and hearts of the people.

"A man planted a vineyard."¹ So begins Jesus' parable. In addition to the grape vines

¹ from Mark 12: 1 NRSV

the owner also provided everything needed to make the vineyard successful: a fence to protect it from wild animals, a home for the winepress so the winemaking process could begin immediately, and a watchtower from which guards could watch for intruders. He set the stage for success and left his creation to the charge of managers who would oversee the workers tending the vines and making the wine. In due season he sent a slave to collect a share of the proceeds – only a share not everything. The managers, wanting more for themselves, beat him and sent him back with nothing. As tends to happen, the cycle of violence continued with each successive representative being assaulted, even killed. Finally, the owner sent his son, thinking that surely the managers would respect his precious son. No, not one bit. Meanwhile, the lush vineyard awaited harvest, the product of such careful planning and diligent work. In the midst of the increasing violence driven by the managers' greed, it appears the workers who had tended it all so carefully and the grapes themselves were lost and forgotten. With all the feuding and the bloodletting, with the attention on a perceived threat that was not even real, with the focus on personal acquisition over doing what the managers had been hired to do, the grapes surely did not thrive. There are no winners in this parable - only violence, loss, and death.

The parallels Jesus drew in this parable were directly pointed at those leaders of faith who were supposed to take care of the people and nurture their faith. Entrusted with the very kingdom of heaven, that is the people of God, they neglected it and instead filled it with violence born out of greed. As they built their power base and controlled the people through rigid rules and an inequitable taxation system, forgotten were the poor and marginalized, the outcast and the ill, the vulnerable that the law *commanded* them to protect and nurture. Instead, like the vineyard managers, they had blood on their hands, blood of the souls of all those who had been rejected, and very soon the blood of God's own Son.

Taken on its own, this is quite arguably one of the more vicious of the parables of Jesus, and it does not end well. "What then will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come to destroy

the tenants and give the vineyard to others.”² Violence yet again. Over the centuries this is one of the texts that has been used to justify horrendous atrocities committed against other people, shrouded in the darkness of entitled exceptionalism. The Crusades, the Inquisition, slavery, the Westward Expansion, decimation of the environment and her resources, abuse of entire groups of people, eradication of wildlife – to name but a few. All in the name of God and with a warped theology of self-deserving reward. In the midst of the carnage of the parable, even as Jesus so vehemently criticized the tenants who violated the trust of the owner, it was with the knowledge that he was moving toward his own violent end, toward death. But this is one parable, only one portion of the ministry of Jesus.

We must look at Jesus in full context of who he was both historically and theologically. We don't hang our faith on the birth at Christmas. We don't center our faith merely on his life on earth. We don't let our faith stand only in the cross or the empty tomb. We don't even put all our faith within the confines of the pages of this book known as the Bible. Instead, we take a step backwards and let the story of Jesus settle into the backdrop of God and all creation, a story that began before time and will continue into the unknown pages of eternity. As we reflect on the entire saga, we note there is an unmistakable arc moving from violence and reaching toward love, grace, peace, toward a broadening of God's Table to encompass the world.

The vineyard, despite the destruction at the hands of the managers, lived on. Shrouded in the palls of Jesus' death was the resurrection and the promise of new life that would never die, not even at the hands of abusive leaders or a selfish faith. For those of us today caught in the crossfire of violent living, that is our hope. There is still life, still hope, no matter how the world might appear. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who not only witnessed but experienced personally the violence of racism and hatred, held on to that hope. In his last book, he wrote:

² Mark 12: 9 NRSV

The ultimate weakness of violence is that it is a descending spiral, begetting the very thing it seeks to destroy..... Returning violence for violence multiplies violence, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars. Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.³

That is our answer to the violence of this text and all violence in sacred writings. That is our response to violence today. That is why we come to the Table. When we come here to God's Table, the world does not shift on its axis. After all, these are but a few moments in our lives. The course of history does not appear to move, because we will go on about our lives in much the same way as we did yesterday, last week, last year. Yet what we do here is perhaps the most significant action of all our living, because we are creating a new reality, we are crafting a world that is more kind and loving, filled with God's *hesed*, that beautifully mysterious word from Micah 6 – to do justice, to love kindness (*hesed*), to walk humbly with our God - the word that sings of who God is and who we are to be. When we come here to share in the wine and the bread, we are proclaiming our faith that God's love can indeed make its presence known as reality even in the parable of the wicked managers who tried to destroy everything, even in the midst of our world that is saturated with a breathtakingly evil violence.

When we take this simple meal into us, it is one of the strongest actions of protest we can make in the name of God. We are announcing to the wicked land managers – your violence will not have the last word. We are announcing to the bullies in our lives, from the personal to those in world power – your intimidation will not work its way into our souls. We are announcing to the haters, to the war-mongerers, to those who rape and pillage God's good creation that we know God's love is stronger than anything and everything you could ever possibly do. When we eat this bread and drink this wine, we are joyfully and defiantly proclaiming to the world that we will do as Jesus did. We will speak the truth; we will shine light

³ Martin Luther King Jr. *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?*. First published 1967. Republished by Beacon Press, 2010.

on lies, injustice, abuse; we will believe in God's transformational love. Then we go from this place to do just that. We will tend the vineyard, God's good creation, in all its fulness - from the people in it to the earth itself. We will choose love as the center of our living, because that is what Jesus did. That is who Jesus was. That is who Jesus is.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life,⁴ and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.⁴

To choose light over darkness, love over hate, peace over violence sounds simplistic and perhaps even naive, especially when one considers the world in which we find ourselves. It certainly will not be the path of least resistance; it's complicated and challenging, putting us often in direct opposition to what the world holds as priorities. It is the way of the cross, and yet it is the only road we can take. As you eat this bread and drink this wine, as you leave here to go into a world that can be so frightening with all its violence, remember God's hope, remember who we are to be.

As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful.⁵

May we all walk with the God of love and peace for now and always. Amen.

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⁴ John 1: 1-5 NRSV

⁵ Colossians 3: 12, 14-15 NRSV