

MARVELOUS IN OUR EYES

SERIES: SUFFERING SERVANT, CONQUERING KING



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Mark 12:1-12
Third Message
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Mark 12:1-12

Stories are powerful.

Jesus, of course, told stories. We call them parables. Today we're going to hear one of them. It's not one of his better-known parables, like the Parable of the Prodigal Son or the Parable of the Sower. But it is no less powerful for not being as widely known.

In the musical *Man of La Mancha*, Cervantes, a prisoner, tells the story of a man who thinks he's Don Quixote, a noble knight. In fact, Cervantes enlists his fellow prisoners to become actors in the story, in which he plays Don Quixote, who isn't altogether with it.

At first glance, the same might be said for the protagonist in the parable that Jesus tells in Mark 12. I call it the Parable of the Crazy Farmer.

What will it take to pry open our eyes so that we can behold the love of God? Look at the parable.

In our Lenten preaching series, we're considering texts in the gospel of Mark that show Jesus to be the Suffering Servant and/or the Conquering King. In today's text, he's mostly the Suffering Servant, but he's also the Conquering King.

Closer to the surface

Mark 12:1-6:

And he began to speak to them in parables. "A man planted a vineyard and put a fence around it and dug a pit for the winepress and built a tower, and leased it to tenants and went into another country. 2 When the season came, he sent a servant to the tenants to get from them some of the fruit of the vineyard. 3 And they took him and beat him and sent him away empty-handed. 4 Again he sent to them another servant, and they struck him on the head and treated him shamefully. 5 And he sent another, and him they killed. And so with

many others: some they beat, and some they killed. 6 He had still one other, a beloved son. Finally he sent him to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.'¹

Jesus tells this parable to the chief priests, scribes, and elders, his enemies (Mark 11:27). He couched his controversial message concerning the in-breaking of the kingdom of God in parables to intrigue followers and confound enemies. Privately, he explained the deeper meanings of some of his stories to his disciples. Publicly, he kept his enemies guessing, lest they understand him too well, mount an effective campaign against him, and bring about his premature demise (Mark 4:10-12).

Now that he has arrived in Jerusalem, however, Jesus is moving toward a showdown with the chief priests, scribes, and elders. Therefore, his message in the parable of Mark 12 is closer to the surface.

The parable echoes the prophet Isaiah's Song of the Vineyard, which is a story of God's love for Israel, her rejection of him, and his judgment of her (Isaiah 5:1-7). It's a "love song" (Isaiah 5:1). Like so many of Jesus' parables, this one retells one of the stories of Israel. This parable, though, is spoken directly to the Jewish leaders who were challenging him.

Are you nuts?

The Scriptures, especially Isaiah 5:1-7, help us understand the story. The vineyard owner represents God. The vineyard represents the people of Israel, the people of God. The tenants represent the leaders of Israel. The servants whom the vineyard owner sends evoke the prophets (Jeremiah 25:4, 26:5). The vineyard owner's son represents the Son of God, the king of Israel, whom Mark has identified as Jesus (Mark 1:11, 9:7).

God created Israel, loved her, provided for her, and protected her so that she might bear fruit for the sake of the world. He entrusted Israel to her leaders, hoping that they would care for his people.

He was relentlessly hopeful. God sent prophets to remind the leaders of their calling, but the leaders persecuted them, beat them, disgraced them, and killed them. Although the leaders kept mistreating his prophets, God kept sending them anyway, hoping for a change of heart.

When we read that the vineyard owner sends his beloved son, we think, “Are you nuts? Don’t you know what they’ll do to him?” The vineyard owner says, “They will respect my son.” We say, “What planet are you living on?”²

Put yourself in the shoes of the vineyard owner. If you had a beloved son, what would you do? If it’s my son, he’s not getting anywhere near those savages.

To this world?

For some, God seems absent from our world, akin to a distant vineyard owner—so distant, in fact, that they question his existence. To them, God, if he exists, doesn’t seem to be doing much of anything about anything. They therefore assume that they can do as they please in the vineyard, so to speak. For some, God’s supposed absence means they can mistreat anyone who challenges their sovereignty, suggests that God expects something of them, or stands in the way of their purposes.

What does the parable say? God is not absent. God is hopeful.

He was patient with Israel, as he sent prophet after prophet after prophet. He’s patient with us, “not wishing that any should perish but that all should reach repentance” (2 Peter 3:9). In his hopefulness, he allows himself to be exploited, time and time again for hundreds and hundreds of years.

Let’s face it, if the vineyard owner represents God, he comes off as reckless. Sending his beloved Son? To this world? If he were human, you might call him not altogether with it.

In *Man of La Mancha*, Don Quixote is not altogether with it. He’s delusional. But he loved enormously in his delusion—so much so that the other characters in the story are transformed. Especially, Aldonza, a barmaid and a prostitute, is transformed. Don Quixote sees her as his noble lady and calls her Dulcinea, “My Little Sweet One.”

Cervantes, accused of inventing stories about madmen, calls them “men whose illusions are very real.” The musical leaves the impression that the world of illusion should be the real one.

What will it take to pry open our eyes to behold the love of God? How about the Parable of the Crazy Farmer? The parable lets us peer into God’s heart. Horrendous evil on earth brings forth lavish beauty from heaven: it brings forth God’s beloved Son. Peering into God’s heart, can you see love—relentless love, costly love?

Back to the parable. What did the tenants do when the vineyard owner sent his beloved son?

Out of the vineyard

Mark 12:7-9:

But those tenants said to one another, ‘This is the heir. Come, let us kill him, and the inheritance will be ours.’ 8 And they took him and killed him and threw him out of the vineyard. 9 What will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and destroy the tenants and give the vineyard to others.

In the parable, the tenants apparently assume that the vineyard owner has died and that the son has come to claim the land. The death of the son, the heir, would leave the land without an owner. Therefore, they conspire to kill the son to claim the vineyard for themselves. It’s not enough for them to kill the heir, however; they also cast him over the wall of the vineyard and shame him by leaving his body to rot instead of burying him.³

What more could the vineyard owner do? After parting with his son, he had no one left to send and nothing left to give. The tenants have made their choice. After exhausting every possibility and suffering every possible insult, the vineyard owner will destroy the tenants.

The chief priests, scribes, and elders of Israel are conspiring to treat the Son of God the way the tenants treated the son of the vineyard owner. They want the people and land of Israel for themselves and their narrow-minded, violent, and corrupt purposes.

Jesus is warning them, however, that if they proceed with their machinations, God will destroy them and transfer leadership of the Israel of God to others who will evidently fulfill Israel’s vocation to bless the world, the disciples of Jesus and other followers of his.

The writer of Hebrews observes that Jesus was crucified outside the gates of Jerusalem, as the son in the story was cast out of the vineyard (Hebrews 13:11-12). God destroyed Jerusalem, and the leaders of Israel along with it, in 70 A.D. through the Roman armies, and he reconstituted Israel around the disciples, who became apostles (Ephesians 2:19-22, Revelation 21:14).

The parable complements the cursing of the fig tree, which represented the temple and Israel as a whole (Mark 11:12-14, 20-21). Neither the fig tree nor the tenants yielded any fruit.

We did

Who killed God's beloved Son? The chief priests, scribes, and elders, who handed him over to the Romans, yes. The Jews who shouted, "Crucify him," yes. The Roman leader who ordered his crucifixion, yes. The Roman soldiers who nailed him to the cross, yes. Anyone else?

Listen to the apostle Paul: "For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures . . ." (1 Corinthians 15:3). We wanted the world for ourselves.

We did. We killed God's beloved Son.

So, God will destroy us, as the vineyard owner destroyed the tenants, right?

By all rights, he should. But instead of destroying us for killing his Son, he uses the death of his Son to save us. If sending his Son to this place comes off as reckless and delusional, how does using our killing of his Son to save us come off? Then he gives us back the world so that we can serve his purposes in it. "He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?" (Romans 8:32) My goodness!

This is a love with which we are not familiar. But it is a love with which we can become more familiar, especially as this parable pries open our eyes.

To cap his parable, Jesus refers the Jewish leaders to the Scriptures.

A stone rejected

Mark 12:10-11:

"Have you not read this Scripture:

**"The stone that the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone
11 this was the Lord's doing,
and it is marvelous in our eyes'?"**

Earlier, when Jesus approached Jerusalem, the pilgrims hailed him with praises based on Psalm 118:26: "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord" (Mark 11:9). Now, Jesus employs words from the same psalm (Psalm 118:22-23).

With the stones of the temple forming the backdrop, Jesus speaks to the Jewish leaders of a stone. He expects the leaders to identify with the builders and to identify him as the stone. Jesus is the odd stone out. He can't be fit into the purposes of the Jewish leaders. Despite their rejection of him, Jesus expects to become the "cornerstone"—or, more likely, the capstone that completes a building.

They can kill him, throw him out of the vineyard, and declare him useless for their purposes, but Jesus predicts his vindication. He's predicting, as he has before in the gospel, his resurrection, albeit in cryptic fashion in the presence of his enemies.

"For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures . . ." (1 Corinthians 15:3-4). Jesus is the Suffering Servant *and* the Conquering King.

The pilgrims may praise Jesus from Psalm 118, but Jesus won't let it go to his head or dissuade him from his task. He listens to the Scriptures—in this case, all of Psalm 118, not just part of it. He'll receive praises based on the psalm, but such praises alert him to the prospect of rejection, also based on the psalm.

Jesus will say regarding the temple, "There will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down" (Mark 13:2). Jesus, though, will be the integral "stone" in the construction of a new temple, made without hands, comprising his followers (Ephesians 2:19-22, 1 Peter 2:4-5).

The Lord's doing

The chief priests, scribes, and elders had just asked Jesus, "By what authority are you doing these things, or who gave you this authority to do them?" (Mark 11:28). Who gave Jesus the authority to disrupt the temple and speak against it? (Mark 11:15-19)

In that the transformation from rejected stone to capstone is "the Lord's doing," the leaders have an answer to their question. Jesus' authority comes from heaven, from the Lord.

The turnaround, impossible apart from the power of God, is marvelous in the eyes of at least some observers. Earlier, Jesus asked his disciples, "Having eyes do you not see . . . ?" (Mark 8:18). He's been trying to open their eyes so that they might understand the cross-shaped nature of his mission. Jesus spoke in parables to confound his enemies, so that "they may indeed see but not perceive" (Mark 4:12). God will vindicate Jesus by raising him from the dead, and some will have their eyes opened to see both his identity as the Son of God and the nature of his mission.

Jesus' parable casts the Jewish leaders in opposition to God.

The story's not over yet

God gives us back to the world so that we can serve his purposes in it. We cannot fit Jesus into our purposes. We must fit into his purposes.

However, his purposes for us are better than anything we could imagine for ourselves. How do you know? Look at the parable. Look at the love you see in the parable. Is it not marvelous in your eyes? Do you think you can trust a God who loves in this way? God's purposes for your life are better than your purposes—way better.

As soon as the words of that last sentence formed in my mind, I looked up and saw a calendar that features a different photograph of our two daughters for each month of the year.

When I was about forty years old, and unmarried, I went out to dinner with my father. He told me, "One of my biggest regrets is what a good father you would have been." Immediately, and virtually without thinking, I said, "The story's not over yet."

Always remember and never forget, when you do not see that God's purposes for your life are better than your purposes, the story's not over yet. When the builders rejected the stone, everyone thought the story was over. But it wasn't.

Not long after dinner with my father, I met Karen, who became my wife. And we brought forth two children. And so it came to pass that I became a father, first at age forty-six and then at age forty-nine.

My father, who died in 2021 at the age of ninety-four, lived long enough to see his son become a father and long enough see his two granddaughters grow to become beautiful young women. One of his biggest regrets was obliterated.

This was the Lord's doing, and it is marvelous in my eyes.

My mother, who had three sons, never said that she wanted a daughter, but I think she did. One of my biggest regrets is that my mother, who died of cancer in 1990, didn't live long enough to meet her daughter-in-law or to hold her granddaughters. But I must trust: God's purposes are better than my purposes. And the story's not over yet.

Is what Jesus has said marvelous in the eyes of the chief priests, scribes, and elders?

To or against?

Mark 12:12:

And they were seeking to arrest him but feared the people, for they perceived that he had told the parable against them. So they left him and went away.

The chief priests, scribes, and elders perceive that Jesus told the parable "against" them. Are they right? Mark says Jesus told the parable not against them but "to" them. If he told it to them, he told it for them—for their benefit.

Conceivably, such a parable, which features the relentless, costly love of God, could pry open their eyes and lead to repentance. The leaders, however, react by seeking the arrest of Jesus. However, they hold themselves back again for fear of the crowd. They leave Jesus, but they will be back.

The parable is not marvelous in their eyes.

Do you believe in Jesus? Have you put your trust in him? Have you invited him into your life? If you haven't, then know this: Jesus is speaking this parable to you. The parable reminds us that we must all appear before God. And the first and most important question on that day will be something like this: "What did you do with my Son?" Because if you do not accept the forgiveness that God offers you in his Son, then he has nothing more to give.

Can you see?

In *Man of La Mancha*, the delusional Don Quixote not only transforms the other characters in the story but also transforms the prisoners that Cervantes told the story to. He even transforms Cervantes, the storyteller!

As he is being led away for trial, Cervantes tells his fellow prisoners, "For me alone was Don Quixote born, and I for him. I give him to you." In the end, the prisoners sing "To Dream the Impossible Dream."

What will it take to pry open our eyes to behold the love of God? The Parable of the Crazy Farmer: Can you see? Is it marvelous in your eyes?

Is there an ache in your heart? Have you been rejected? Remember: "The stone that the builders rejected / has become the capstone." Rejection is a sacred doorway, first into the presence of God and then into the purposes of God.

Invite the love you see in Mark 12 into the aching abyss of your heart.

Endnotes

1. Literary structure:

A "A man planted a vineyard ..." (1)

B He sent slaves: they were beaten and killed (2-5)

B' He sent his son: they killed him and threw him out of the vineyard (6-8)

A' Owner will destroy vine-growers, give vineyard to others (9)

C "The stone that the builders rejected" (10a)

D "has become the chief corner stone" (10b)

D' "this was the Lord's doing" (11a)

C' "and it is marvelous in our eyes" (11b)

2. The Parable of the Vineyard echoes the Parable of the Sower (Mark 4:1-20). After three unsuccessful sowings, the

fourth sowing yields a bumper crop. After sending three slaves (and many others after that), the vineyard owner finally sends his son. But instead of returning with buckets of grapes, as we might expect after the Parable of the Sower, the son meets with a different fate.

3. The farmers are like Joseph's brothers, who were jealous of him and said, "Now then, come and let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits ..." (Genesis 37:20). They are also like Ahab, the wicked king of Israel, who allowed Jezebel to arrange for the death of Naboth, who had refused to give his vineyard to the king (1 Kings 21:1-16).

