

March 3rd: Reject

This Fall we returned to the Narrative Lectionary—a year long collection of readings that take us from the origins of God’s people to the first century world. These readings are chosen on purpose, because they help us trace a particular theme throughout our scripture texts—and this year our theme is “Love in Action.” In each of these passages, there’s a compelling action that is embedded into the narrative, that I want us to be paying attention to and practicing this week. Of course, we know that love is the most important verb of all, so we’ll also be tracing how God’s love was shown to our spiritual ancestors and discover how God’s love is still being shown to us today.

As we study together, I want to remind us that the goal isn’t simply to increase our knowledge of God—the goal is to increase in love towards God and towards each other. The goal is to increase our love in action, this week and every week, so that our world can more and reflect God’s enduring love for all of creation.

Before we dig a little deeper in today’s text, let’s pray.

Son of God, You humbled yourself and took on human form, coming to us in our moment of need. You came down from the perfection of eternity into our mess and muck, because you loved us too deeply to stay away. But there were some who scorned you, despised you, turned against you—and that rejection resulted in your death. Even in the midst of their hatred, you responded with a display of compassion that has resonated throughout centuries. We are here today because we still bear witness to your love and your sacrifice, and we trust that you have modeled the way for us, even if that road is paved with rejections of our own. Remind us today of this sacred path, we pray. Amen.

It’s never ideal to start a sermon with a trigger warning or a disclaimer, but I think this text merits a little bit of deviation from our normal pattern.

I’m just going to begin by saying that this passage from the Gospel of Mark is one of the most difficult in the entire New Testament. And that’s not just me saying that—biblical scholars and theologians from across history and cultures

have all concluded that this particular passage is incredibly sensitive and prone to misinterpretation. Over thousands of years of Christian history, this piece of Jesus' ministry has posed a challenge for pastors and lay people alike—it doesn't lend itself to simple answers or an uplifting emotional response. So as I tried to navigate this text and reflect on what God might be saying to us through it, I kept in mind that it might be challenging for us to come up with a definitive action that we could carry into our week or put into practice.

Additionally, I want to warn us that this story isn't meant for the faint of heart. Although we sometimes treat the Bible like a storybook for children, this is not a children's story in any way. Although Jesus draws his audience into an allegory, this is not a fairytale, and it definitely does not have a happy ending.

To make matters even more difficult, this text isn't just theologically intense, it's also very graphic in its content. Although some detail is left to our imagination, this story does explicitly include references to brutality and murder. And that could be confusing for us, as we hold this picture of who Jesus is in our minds. In reading this text, we might have to confront the idea that Jesus, our loving, compassionate, tender Jesus, is the one telling this violent parable—and we might have to deal with the fact that this violence is not only metaphorical in nature, but a quickly approaching reality for Jesus and his followers. But before we take a look at the passage itself, let's refresh our memory of this gospel account and how Mark has structured his storytelling.

Despite the fact that this Sunday is the third Sunday in the season of Lent, and therefore in the middle of this liturgical season, this particular story comes near the end of Mark's writings. If we think about Mark's account chronologically, this teaching moment occurs after Jesus has already entered Jerusalem for the Passover feast—meaning that this event happens after the passage that we will read on Palm Sunday. Jesus is telling this parable after he has been welcomed into the city like a conquering king—and after his path had been covered in palms and cloaks, but something has changed. If we begin to notice the shift between the events of Palm Sunday and this moment in the

temple courts, we might be asking ourselves: if Jesus was just celebrated like a king, why is he telling a story about an act of violent rejection? We might be wondering: what happens in between these two moments in time that leads Jesus to share such a dire message?

Well, as Pastor Heather shared last week, this second half of Mark's gospel is devoted to Jesus' final week of life. These chapters detail Jesus' movements as he enters the holy city of Jerusalem, knowing that he will never leave it alive. He comes into this Passover celebration knowing it is his last, and I think that this implicit knowledge of his death colors all of his interactions. From the moment that Jesus begins this journey, I think the forthcoming violence that he knows will take place weighs heavy on his spirit. And it must have been even more difficult for him to prepare for this impending brutality knowing that just a few days earlier he had been exalted and praised. It must have been difficult to go from being a beloved leader to a target of anger and hatred. Jesus goes from being led into town on a donkey, to being questioned by the religious leaders who have gathered to attack his character and his miraculous deeds.

So with all of that in mind, let's take a closer look at Jesus' parable.

The story begins this way: "A man planted a vineyard. He put a wall around it, dug a pit for the winepress and built a watchtower. Then he rented the vineyard to some farmers and moved to another place. At harvest time he sent a servant to the tenants to collect from them some of the fruit of the vineyard. But they seized him, beat him and sent him away empty-handed. Then he sent another servant to them; they struck this man on the head and treated him shamefully. He sent still another, and that one they killed. He sent many others; some of them they beat, others they killed."

Okay, let's pause, because that's already a lot to digest.

We have this landowner, and the tenants who occupy his vineyard. We have servants that are sent to collect part of the harvest, who are beaten, struck on the head, killed, or sent away empty handed. What we might not understand,

upon first reading these verses, is why the tenants are responding in such a violent way. Why are the attempts to collect the fruit rejected? Well, different biblical scholars have argued that the tenants see this collection as a threat, as someone coming in to take away what they have labored for. It doesn't matter that the landowner is within his rights, or that the fruit is technically his, because it is the tenants who have toiled in the heat of the sun and worked long days for this harvest. They don't want to give any of it up, even for the person who owns the land in the first place.

Jesus then continues, "He had one left to send, a son, whom he loved. He sent him last of all, saying, 'They will respect my son.' "But the tenants said to one another, 'This is the heir. Come, let's kill him, and the inheritance will be ours.' So they took him and killed him, and threw him out of the vineyard."

Again, this is a lot to process. Jesus seems to be saying that this conflict between the landowner and the tenants comes to a head when the beloved son and heir is sent to collect the harvest. The tenants plot specifically to kill the heir, so that they can receive the inheritance that is due to him. The workers want what has been promised to this beloved son, and they think that they will get it, if he is removed from the equation. They think that killing him will result in their future safety and fortune.

Jesus concludes with a quote from Psalm 118: "'The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; the Lord has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes'" This poetic prayer was also quoted during his entry into Jerusalem, when the crowds cheered and said, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" So again, we have this contrast between blessing and rejection.

Once Jesus has ended his parable, our passage ends with this: "Then the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders looked for a way to arrest him because they knew he had spoken the parable against them. But they were afraid of the crowd; so they left him and went away." So we are supposed to understand that these priests, teachers of the law, and elders saw themselves

in Jesus' story—and they were not happy with what they had heard. They come to the conclusion that Jesus spoke the parable against them—and in order for that to be true, it would mean that Jesus intended for them to be the tenants in the story—Jesus implicitly names them as the violent, murderous, brutal characters—they are not the powerful landowner or the beloved son. Through this story, Jesus tells them that they are the ones who will do the acts of violence, and he is the beloved son and heir—the one who will be murdered and thrown out. By telling this parable, Jesus is not only predicting his own death, but indicting those who will betray and kill him.

But why? Why are these priests and teachers so intent on discrediting and harming Jesus?

Well, just like in the parable, I think Jesus represents a threat to the religious leaders and the spiritual establishment of his day. His ministry and following was perceived as taking away from what these leaders and institutions had worked hard to build. His presence reminded them that they were stewards of God's people and stewards of faith, but not owners of it. Even though they were servants of God, the priests didn't own the temple, and even though the teachers of the law knew scripture, that didn't give them the authority to wield it as they pleased. Jesus' leadership and identity endangered their power, and they would do anything to prevent themselves from losing control over the system that granted them that power in the first place. To them, the arrival of the Messiah is only good news if he doesn't disrupt the status quo.

As we consider what this intense story and this complicated passage might mean for our own lives, I have some thoughts that I'd like to share about this theme of rejection.

First, if you are going through a situation in your own life where you are feeling rejected in any way, I think it is the perfect time to seek out Jesus. Maybe you and Jesus are old friends, or maybe you've never spent much time together before, but if you're experiencing some difficult moments right now, he could be someone to turn to and someone who offers some wisdom for you.

If you are pushing back against unjust systems and encountering resistance from organizations and institutions—Jesus knows exactly what that’s like.

If you are fighting for liberation or working to change something in your community, but you are finding your path full of obstacles—Jesus has lived through that.

If you’re standing up for something and it causes you to lose friends or family members—Jesus is right there with you.

If you’re laboring for peace, but all it’s getting you is more conflict, Jesus knows that struggle too.

If you are disrupting the status quo and upsetting people in power, Jesus has gone through that too.

If you feel like giving up, because it’s just too much to bear right now—Jesus hears that, and he gets it. All of those demoralizing situations, all of that pain, it’s real. But you don’t have to go through it alone.

But here’s where I think Jesus might have some good news for us today.

Remember the Psalm that Jesus quoted? The line goes, “the stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone.” Jesus means that the stone that was thrown away, or pushed aside, or overlooked, or deemed not good enough, becomes the foundation of something new. It becomes the basis for something else to be raised up.

Today, this simple verse is giving me hope, and I’m holding onto it like a prophecy that is just waiting to come true. You see, my friends, all of that pushing back against injustice, or standing up for something important, or seeking liberation—it’s not for nothing. Oh it might feel like it right now, when the rejection is stinging, or it feels really heavy, but Jesus tells us that it’s building something beautiful. Whether you’re building a platform or building a

movement, breaking down barriers or breaking down patterns of dysfunction, raising up healthy kids or raising up a brighter future, we are creating something holy. Our actions, our labor, our compassion are laying the foundation for something more whole, more free, and more loving.

My friends, the rejection might be real, but so is the Kingdom that we are bringing into being. Cornerstone by cornerstone, we're bringing it to life, each of us contributing to what is to come. So let's not get discouraged by the attempts of others to reject us, let's keep building something beautiful together.

Amen.