

almost no attention until they died. But on this night, her supervisor did something different. JoAnne said, “She would go into the nursery multiple times through the shift and hold that baby. She put her face right down next to the baby, and she talked to her. And she even fed her a bottle and rocked her in the big rocking chair. And she treated that baby [and the mother] as though she were her own.”<sup>3</sup>

What JoAnne saw was her supervisor giving her life to God by giving her love to a baby who was dying. At a time when people hardly knew what to say or do in such circumstances, the supervisor honored the image of God in that child, despite the terrible situation. She turned away from the tendency the tenants illustrate to hurt or ignore others. By her actions, she answered the question: what does it look like to give our whole lives to God, the only one to whom we owe them? It looks like love and mercy. JoAnne has tried to emulate that supervisor throughout the rest of her career.

Though we get bogged down in the violence, the parable illustrates this for us, too, when the landowner sends his son to the vineyard. As Mary Ann Tolbert says, “centuries of familiarity with the image have diluted the absurd charity of endangering a relative in order to give murderers a final chance to turn around.”<sup>4</sup> But ‘absurd charity’ is a big part of God’s good news. The story of Jesus becoming human, dying, rising, is about God doing an absolutely absurd thing in order to reconcile and love the world into wholeness. Many things that seem absurd can also be ways we give our lives to God and each other: caring for people who are said to be lost causes; beautifying neighborhoods together as one small way to heal after tragedy; giving away more than we expect to care for others; standing up for what’s right even when you may lose everything as a result.

What do we owe, and to whom? Well, we owe God everything, in return for giving us everything: this creation, life and love, this community. What does it look like to live that way? It often looks like absurd charity, overflowing love, and undeserved mercy. Which is to say, it looks a lot like living the way Jesus lived.

All glory and honor, thanks and praise be to God. Amen.



March 3, 2024  
Third Sunday in Lent  
“Offer Your Whole Life”  
Rev. Emma Nickel  
Scripture: Mark 12:1-17

Did you like that parable we read? I sure do not! As one commentator said, the story of the wicked tenants is a parable that is hard to love. But alas, we believe in reading not just the parts of the Bible we *like*, but also the ones that are hard to understand and ones that might even turn us off. Because we’re confident that God has something to say to us through all of it.

We have two stories before us. The parable of the wicked tenants and the encounter about paying taxes. The over arching question in both of them seems to be—what do we owe, and to whom? And once we figure that out, if we can, what does it look like to give it? The parable describes a vineyard, which is a common Biblical image for God’s covenant people. Jesus’ listeners would have heard echoes of a passage from the prophet Isaiah, in which God planted a vineyard, representing the establishment of the people Israel. (As I often like to remind us, the concept of the people called Israel in the Bible is not the same as the modern day nation state of the same name, today). God’s people as the vineyard did not produce grapes for fine wine, though, Isaiah said; they went astray and only produced wild grapes.

In Mark’s gospel, Jesus picks up on this same vineyard metaphor, except in a much more violent telling. In the parable, the landowner sent servants and then his own son to collect the portion of the harvest owed to him. But the outcome was terrible. The tenants reacted violently, killing the servants and even the son. And the landowner promised to destroy them in return and give the vineyard to someone else.

Christians have often abused this story by interpreting it as a dismissal of God’s covenant with the Jewish people, represented by the tenants, and saying that Christianity has superseded and replaced Judaism. That is an interpretation we cannot condone. Jesus meant to critique the religious leadership of his time for their actions, not condemn a whole people or religious tradition. God’s covenant remains strong. The text invites us to think how we ourselves are reflected in the story, anyway. It is not only

1 Amy Yee, “How Rwanda Tidied Up Its Streets (And the Rest of the Country, Too),” NPR, July 18, 2018, <https://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2018/07/18/628364015/how-rwanda-tidied-up-its-streets-and-the-rest-of-the-country-too>

2 Lamar Williamson, Jr. *Interpretation: Mark* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1983), 220-221.

3 Laura Krewel, “The way a dying baby girl was cared for in 1980 helped shape her approach to nursing,” NPR, February 14, 2024, <https://www.npr.org/2024/02/14/1231014371/the-way-a-dying-baby-girl-was-cared-for-in-1980-helped-shape-her-approach-to-nur>

4 Mary Anne Tobert, qtd. in William Placher, *Mark* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2010), 167.

about people long ago and far away. How do we take care of the vineyard given to us, the one we are planted in? Are we treating with love the people and the land in our community, or are we tempted to act like the tenants?

Rwanda in eastern Africa is recognized as one of the cleanest countries as compared to many of its neighbors. Its streets are tidy, there is almost no litter, landscaping is kept neat; there are no piles of trash along roadsides and plastic bags have been banned there for fifteen years.<sup>1</sup> Much of this is the result of what is called, *umuganda*. Traditionally, the word means coming together in common purpose. Today, *umuganda* is a community clean-up held on the last Saturday of every month. People pick up trash, garden, do landscaping, clean public parks, and sometimes even assist with road construction or building projects. This practice has had incredible results. It is people taking care of their vineyard, so to speak, both the land and the community.

The *umuganda* clean-up is clear example of people caring for each other by caring for the land and environment around them. It shows respect and is a way people can serve their community. All things that were so badly missing in the parable. But there is also a shadow side. The monthly clean-up day is not voluntary, but compulsory. All able-bodied Rwandans are required to pitch in. Police can fine those found slacking \$6, in a country where the average monthly income is only \$150. Like a government demanding not a tax of money, but a tax of labor. The concept of *umuganda* was also used during the colonial era to call for much more serious forms of forced labor. And in 1994, *umuganda* was the basis for urging ethnic Hutus to do their community service, “their job,” of killing Tutsis, who were simply their neighbors. Eight-hundred thousand people were killed in three months.

Like the tenants in the story, too often, our communal attitudes go awry. Instead of increasing the common good, they draw us together in violence and hurt. We forget how, or we choose not to, take care of our community in the way that *umuganda* first imagined. We somehow refuse to see the image of God in one another. We imagine that something is owed to us; that an inheritance is our rightful due or that we are superior to someone else. Forgetting that the land, our lives, our community are all a gift from God. When we realize and receive those gifts from God, we know that the proper response is gratitude. A community spirit that draws us together in goodness—*umuganda* in its best sense. A joint offering of our lives to God and one another.

Which takes us to the second part of this passage in Mark, the question about paying taxes to the government. Just like the people in Jesus’ time,

we do not *only* live in God’s vineyard community. We also live in a political community. The gathered religious leaders had heard Jesus tell the parable and they knew he was saying they were like the wicked tenants. So they wanted to stick it to him. They raised the question to him about whether it was lawful to pay taxes or not. They were hoping for an answer that was either blasphemous against the faith or treasonous against the government, so that they would have further reason to oust him. Jesus refused to fall into their trap. The first thing he did was ask for a coin. When someone produced one, he showed them the face of the emperor on the coin and the inscription that reminded them of the emperor’s supposed divine status. And then, in the line many of us know so well, Jesus said “Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s and to God the things that are God’s.” Which is an answer both clear and still utterly confusing. What is the emperor’s? And what is God’s?

The picture on the coin is key to our understanding. The image of Caesar made it clear that the coin belonged to the emperor. So Jesus indicated that the leader pictured there had some right to collect money. But his command to give to God meant that the emperor’s right was quite limited. Jesus’ words recalled the doctrine that humanity was created in the image of God. Each person bears something holy inside them; some spark of God. And therefore, as Lamar Williamson puts it, “while we owe some duty to the state..., our primary loyalty belongs to God...our primary obligation to God includes and transcends every other duty.”<sup>2</sup>

The only true compulsory service is to give our lives to God, who first gave them to us. And thus to devote ourselves to the community in which God has so generously placed us. That is how we show our gratitude. That is how we demonstrate our understanding that everything we have is a gift - from the land we walk on to the food we eat. That is how we show that we see the image of God in one another, whether we are tenants or landowners, religious or not religious, conservatives or liberals, born and bred Americans or first generation immigrants.

To give our lives to God often looks a lot like giving them to each other. Like honoring the other members of the vineyard, who are similarly made in God’s image. And especially doing that for people the rest of the world believes are disposable. JoAnne Foley is a maternity care nurse who recognized her supervisor doing this when she first started her career in 1980. Late at night, a baby girl was born with a severe congenital disorder that affected her brain and skull. She was expected to die soon. At that time in the medical world, JoAnne had seen similar cases before where babies were placed in a bassinet, away from their mother, and received