

Mark 12:1-12
Mark 12:35-13:13
February 28, 2010

Stand Off

If you watch the news, read newspapers or visit news websites then no doubt you are aware that there is a prolonged and ongoing debate about healthcare in our nation. Versions of healthcare reform have been crafted over a period of a year by people who are greatly concerned about the vast number of uninsured people in our nation. These same versions of healthcare reform have been mercilessly assailed by other people who are worried about federal mandates and federal deficits. The art of compromise seems to be a forgotten craft. Republican and Democratic politicians have spent the better part of a year screaming at each other with blistering attacks. Most American citizens are dismayed by this altercation and the lack of progress on this business and many other issues as well. Sometimes commentators call this Capital dysfunction gridlock. Sometimes they call it partisan politics. The people we have sent to congress are at a stand-off.

It's Tuesday of the last week of Jesus' life and there is a stand off in Jerusalem, stand off between Jesus and the leaders of the

temple. Jerusalem was the Capital city of Israel when it was an independent nation. In Jesus' day Jerusalem was still the center of Judaism and the home of the temple, even though Israel was occupied by Roman troops and a part of the empire.

Lent is the forty day period of preparing our hearts for Easter. Lent spans six Sundays and on this the second Sunday in Lent we are focusing in on Tuesday of what we now call Holy Week. This is sermon 2 of six sermon series on Jesus' last week based in part on the book *The Last Week* by Marcus Borg and Dominic Crossan. Our Gospel readings for Lent this year come from Mark. Mark is the sole Gospel writer who breaks the events of Holy Week into a daily chronology. The Gospel of Mark was written in the early seventies of the first century and Mark was used by the other Gospel writers as a source document for their work. Mark makes it clear that there is a stand off between Jesus and the leaders of the temple in the early part of Holy Week.

Tuesday is the second day after Palm Sunday when in a planned act of political protest Jesus challenges the violence of the Roman occupation by entering Jerusalem on the colt of a donkey. Governor Pilate has entered the city at the main gate on a giant

White war horse followed by hundreds of troops. Like Jesus and his twelve, they have come for Passover. Jesus has come in peace. Pilate has come to keep the peace. Their understandings of peace are miles apart. The Jewish people cheer Jesus

Tuesday of Holy Week is the day after Jesus turns over the tables of the money changers in the temple. Jesus, a good and faithful Jew has a beef with the temple authorities. He thinks they have betrayed Israel, Judaism and God. He thinks them collaborators with Rome who ignore the needs of the people. Jesus is angry because the religious leaders are not shepherds. They are wolves who feed on the people. Together with Rome they have taxed the people into poverty and serfdom. The religious leaders are afraid of Jesus.

Two whole chapters in the Gospel of Mark are devoted to the Tuesday stand off and the stage for the Tuesday stand off is the temple. Jesus is in the temple teaching his gospel of love, non violence and faith in God. He is on the home turf of the temple leaders and they keep challenging him. They are trying to entrap him with tricky questions. They want to know by what authority he teaches.

One way he responds is with the Parable of the Vineyard which we have read this morning. Some people who study this parable teach that the tenants of the vineyard represent Israel and that Israel rejected the Son of the Vineyard owner who is God. They conclude therefore that Jews are bad. This Parochial and self serving interpretation has led to Christian prejudice against Jews and acts of Holocaust and genocide. The fact of the matter is that the Vineyard represents Israel and the tenants of the vineyard are the temple authorities. Jesus tells this parable to explain how corrupt the religious leaders are. It is the leaders who have denied God, betrayed the people and polluted the Jewish faith. Because the temple authorities have mismanaged the Jewish faith, God is taking it away from them. This parable is not a condemnation of Jews, but rather a complaint against any religious leader or any person of faith who mismanages the gifts of God. God has given each of us a vineyard to manage. We have families and relationships. We have our church. We have our jobs, our classes at school and our personal gifts. We have our community and our nation and God expects us to manage our vineyard in a faithful manner.

Tuesday goes on and certain Sadducees and scribes continue their attempts at entrapment. Jesus dodges their ambushes and feints. When asked what is the greatest commandment; he tells them love God with all heart, mind, soul and strength and neighbor as self. When asked about paying taxes to Rome he says let Caesar have what is Caesars (wink, wink), which since God owns the world and everything in it means: give God your complete allegiance and Caesar nothing. Or if your Caesar is worthy, give your Caesar the bronze medal. The gold goes to God.

He then whacks them back. You scribes like your designer robes. You religious leaders like it when people kiss your grits, but you pray only so people will see you pray and you devour the meager estates of widows.

Just then a poor widow puts two copper coins in the metal offering basket. It makes a tiny sound; but was probably her funds for dinner. Proportionately it was an extraordinary gift, worth much more in God's eyes than the Gold the rich religious leaders gave; for they gave from their abundance. This is a great text to preach during stewardship season and I have used it many times; but in the context of the last week of Jesus' life, this passage must also be understood

in light of what the prophets taught in ancient Israel. True faith they said is not just worship. True faith the prophets taught is exercised when the widow the orphan and alien are properly cared for.

Getting back to healthcare for just a moment; as Americans it makes much sense for us to demand a balanced budget from our congress. As Christian Americans we must demand a balanced budget that provides care for the widow the orphan and the alien. When 30 to 45 million people in our nation do not have health insurance, it is a fact that the burden falls disproportionately on women, children and single women with children. I hate to add fuel to the immigration debate, but it is also a long standing Jewish and Christian teaching to take care of the alien in the land. Be careful about what you say you believe; Jesus often leads us into strange new lands and tough stands.

In fact Jesus tells his disciples that faith will cost you. It will cost you your comfort, your pride, your convenience and maybe even will get you a beating or it will cost you your life. When Mark quotes Jesus as talking about the destruction of the temple and the persecution of the faithful; let's remember that Mark is writing in the year, let's say, 72. By the year 72 a Jewish rebellion has led to the

complete destruction of the Jewish temple. The Roman Empire, like the Babylonian Empire six hundred years earlier, has taken the temple and leveled it brick by brick. By the year 72, Christian Jews are being persecuted by Roman authorities and Jews who do not believe that Jesus was the Son of God. Mark knew that true faith can get you into trouble, because true faith had gotten him and his church in trouble.

All during these teachings in the temple the religious leaders try to trap Jesus and he slaps them back. Tuesday is stand off day and Jesus is making the religious leaders very very angry.

It strikes me that the image of a stand off is a very poignant one for Lent. Sometimes faith is a stand off. Jesus has all these pie in the sky ideas for my life and I'm living in the real world. He is preaching love love love like some Beatle rock star all you need is love and we maybe we aren't feeling the love. Terrorists threaten our way of life, big banks gamble with our financial system, our neighbors are not so neighborly, our boss wants a piece of our hide and the kids at school are often not very nice. Even the people we love get on our nerves.

We have this idea that we would like to live faithful lives. We surely have an idea we would like to be closer to God than we are closer to going nuts in this crazy world, but we are not sure how to get there. We have this idea that we would like to have a stronger sense of God's presence in our lives. We get little tastes of the holy in church, in the eyes of a truly listening friend, in the beauty of spring bulbs pushing their way up and past icy snow melt, in the laughter of children.

In Lent we must take stock of our vineyard. During Lent we must go out and walk in our garden. How does it grow? Do our vines look healthy. Maybe they need fertilizer. Maybe the winter cold calls for some pruning. If our lives are vineyards then according to the parable of Jesus, God is looking for a harvest.

We tend to immerse ourselves in the world. We tend to surround ourselves with people who think like us and act like us. Thomas Merton a teacher on prayer and contemplation wrote this "we must be saved from immersion in the sea of lies and passions which is called the world. And we must be [rescued] above all from that abyss of confusion and absurdity which is our own worldly self." ... To be rescued is to return to God and to allow God to discover us.

Our faith begins at baptism “From then on our life becomes a series of choices between the fiction of our false self, whom we feed with allusions of passion and selfish appetite and our loving consent to the purely gracious mercy of God.”¹

Our faith, our spirituality, the state of our heart is often at a stand off with God. Maybe we are fighting with God like the temple leaders challenged Jesus. Maybe we are just stuck and wishing for more. Lent is that time of the year, when we are encouraged to take some time out and to take stock of our relationship with God and our life. We need to inspect our vineyard. If we would like things to be different between us and God, if we would lock to unstop faith gridlock, if we would like to defuse a faith standoff; then we will need to change something.

¹ Thomas Merton in *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 1961 pages 38-42