

Pressed by God in the Vineyard of Life
based on Mark 11:27-12:12, David Jahnke, 9/13/15

The leaders around the temple were not the evil-doers we often make them out to be. Nor are the politicians in today's world. Check out Stephen Colbert's recent interview with Joe Biden if you need newfound faith in the humanity of our politicians. Biden was not exactly articulate but that was a part of his humanity. And they talked about grief and faith on national television. It was moving.

Generally speaking, back in Jesus' day and today, leaders are smart and good people. They came to power because they were blessed with a good education and a moral upbringing and want to make their community, nation and world a better place.

And so do we. Some of us are today's priests, lawyers and elders and the rest of us have much in common with them. We have good hearts and minds. We believe that God loves and cares for us and wants us to uphold what is good. And almost all of us have received a good education and upbringing which have led us to places of economic, spiritual and political power.

Jesus was different. He grew up poor and with little education as the son of a carpenter in Nazareth which did not have much of a reputation as far as towns go. When Phillip first told Nathanael that Jesus was from Nazareth, Nathanael said, "Can anything good come from there?" That's how John speaks of Jesus' origins. Luke writes of his birth in a lowly stable and Matthew points out the scandal of Mary's getting pregnant before she and Joseph were married.

So let's first stop and acknowledge this surprising aspect of Jesus' background. Excellent things come from really harsh, even bad circumstances.

Jesus did not have any official authority. So when he arrives in Jerusalem and marches to the temple with his crowd of followers and immediately overturns the tables of the money-changers and salesmen and tells the temple leaders that they are failing to heed God's call, they feel threatened.

And so do we when Jesus' Word and Spirit come to this temple and shake things up; when the parable of the vineyard is spoken and we realize we are the farmers charged with caring for God's creation but not giving enough back to God; when we remember that Jesus was marching with and for the poor folk, sinful and ostracized folk. And that he is calling us to bear to them the fruits of the Kingdom of heaven...and, yes, vice-versa. We are to be one, not divided by class and education and culture.

Particularly troubling is the temple leaders being intrigued by Jesus but ultimately wanting him killed which also applies to us. The simple fact is we reject Jesus' Way of Life because it seems to leave us so vulnerable. Like the farmers in the parable, we try to grab a hold of the inheritance for ourselves— the security, the peace, the comfort, the pleasure, the prosperity— doing our best to ignore what this means for Jesus' little ones who suffer daily.

I heard someone in the Obama administration talking about how America is hoping to increase our reception of Syrian refugees to 10,000 this year which he basically admitted is a rather pitiful number. And he gave the reason which cuts across party lines, "The safety and security of the American people must come first so it takes 12 to 18 months to process every individual." 12-18 months... And in the last six months, 2000 refugees have drowned in the Mediterranean. How many thousands more have died from starvation or health problems or the war?

Ben Carson also said he wished we could take in all of the refugees. But that we just can't. So we should just take in those who will benefit the American economy.

The American and the realist in me understands all of this. And I know Carson is good Christian man. But his point-of-view is political, not Christian. Jesus was not about receiving those who would bless him; but rather receiving all who wanted a blessing from him and making their lives new by the power of love and care.

So as I was reflecting on this text, I was trying to figure out where the good news was for the relatively powerful like us and, yes, especially for the really powerful and more broadly, all human beings who bear responsibility for putting the Son up on the cross. I found the good news in Jesus' quote that the stone that the builders rejected was made into the capstone and the Lord did this.

This refers to God's eventual raising of Jesus from the dead, vindicating him. But God was also intimately involved in the people and events that led up to Jesus' death and faith says that all of that was part of God's providential plan. So even in the ways that we refuse to follow Jesus' Way to the Kingdom, the Lord is mysteriously in front of, behind, above, and with us. Even at our worst, God still holds us in his hands and can lead us back into the Light.

We see Jesus on the cross and even there we hear good news—“Father forgive them for they know not what they are doing.” We all know Jesus and accept his reign of love to differing degrees. And we thus continue to contribute to the death of his body on earth to differing degrees. But from the cross, Jesus forgives.

What is more important than our lack of knowledge or will is that *Jesus knows us*. He knows all of our weaknesses, our limitations, our sins. Paul goes so far as to say that Jesus became our sin on the cross! Jesus and His Father know us intimately, inside and out, and yet they accept all of us...period, end of sentence; end of judgment and the beginning of life.

Knowing our sins are forgiven and redeemed—they have been made up for and can even be made good!!—that means that those mistakes and regrets don't have to haunt us anymore. They can be let go and when they come back to us which they do-- think of them as times in which we learned about ourselves and became better people; and that God might have used those mistakes for the good in some wondrous way. Our God can do that...

The good news also comes from Peter who went back to the same halls of power where Jesus got into trouble and told the same people that they had made a terrible mistake in having him crucified; that Jesus was raised from the dead and was therefore the Messiah. Peter gave them another chance to become the Light of the world they were made to be. We too are given chance after chance to be and do the same.

As of late, I have needed to be a bit hands off with regards to my younger son's piano playing. He is going through what I hope is a stage where he does not want me around at all when he is practicing. I am guessing that he feels judged and demeaned and thinks I expect too much of him; of course all I want to do is help. The other night, he let me listen for a couple of minutes but then tried to kick me out. And I was feeling stubborn so I stayed. Well like father like son...after 6 or 7 minutes of awkward silence from his stubbornly refusing to play, spoke about how it is wrong to disobey his dad. He finally played and then stormed upstairs. I went up after him after a while but he would not open his door.

A little later I saw a piece of paper which had been pushed under the crack saying, “Leave me alone!” I found the key and went in and we talked a little and I gave him a back scratch and after he went to sleep, I wrote on his piece of paper under “Leave me alone....”, “No! I love you too much! Dad.”

This is how it is with God. His Word and presence sometimes feel overbearing; like we can never do good enough and have to keep getting better. Sometimes, we would just as soon He leave us alone. But He sticks with us because he loves us too much; and he wants to help us grow. And he wants everyone in the world to know love and to grow which is why he presses and molds us into a deeper service of His Kingdom.

He wants his children in danger saved; his hungry ones fed. He wants abundant knowledge and beauty and love to surround every child every day. There is so much harvest work to do, all rooted in Jesus' life, death and resurrection. We need to look at him in scripture, consider his teachings, believe in him and have our lives transformed by his risen presence, even as we call the world to the same.

The elders, chief priests and lawyers knew Jesus' parable was about them so they tried to have him stopped. Having heard that the parable is about us, will we try to stop Jesus' Word and Spirit? Or will we reap the harvest of Life in our homes, workplaces and communities, remembering who Life comes from and what it is meant for?

To the one who can do far more abundantly in us than all we can ask or imagine, to God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus, now and forevermore. And God's people say...

