

**Please take a sermon prior to the worship service only if necessary due to hearing impairment. After the service, sermons are available for any who wish to take one.**

“Cramming for the Test”  
Based on Matthew 21: 33-46  
by Rev. Meghan Davis  
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Longview Presbyterian Church

This is not exactly the kind of Biblical passage I would hope to preach on for World Communion Sunday. An ideal passage for World Communion Sunday would be one that talks about loving your neighbor, we are all one family. You know, something that would lend itself to a nice “kumbaya” sermon. Not the violence, rejection of God and impending judgment we get in this passage. Or the laying down the law (quite literally) that we got in the Exodus passage. So where’s the loving, heart-warming, World Communion Sunday message in these passages?

First, we get the commandments Moses delivers from God to the people. These laws given to the people all fit into one of two categories: laws having to do with how we deal with God and laws having to do with how we deal with one another. These laws are about relationship. Our relationships with God and our relationships with one another. Or, as Jesus (and the Hebrew scriptures) so succinctly sum it up: Love God with all your heart, mind and strength and your neighbor as yourself.

When God gives the commandments to Moses and Moses passes them on to the people, there’s a lot of shock and awe: thunder, lightening, trumpets, a smoking mountain. No special effect is spared. So the people are scared (and who wouldn’t be?) They tell Moses, “You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, or we will die.” And Moses replies, “Do not be afraid; for God has come only to test you and to put the fear of him upon you so that you do not sin.” Don’t be afraid. This is a test. It is only a test...

And in the Gospel lesson for today there’s another test. Jesus tells a parable of an absentee vineyard owner who sends servants to the vineyard to collect his share of the harvest. But the tenants are wicked and beat and kill the servants. The landowner sends more servants and the same thing happens. The third time, he sends his own son thinking that surely the tenants will show him proper respect. But alas, even the son is killed. In this allegory, the landowner is God, the servants are the prophets and the son is, of course, Jesus. But who are the wicked tenants? The chief priests and Pharisees hearing the parable comprehend that Jesus is referring to them. And it’s important to remember that

Jesus' judgment was against these religious leaders he considered hypocritical, not against the Jewish people as a whole.

In the parable, the landowner tests the tenants and they fail the test. The landowner will take the land away from the wicked tenants and turn it over to tenants who will produce the fruits of the kingdom. Those listening to Jesus tell the parable assume that the landowner will deal harshly with the wicked tenants, that he will "put those wretches to a miserable death." But the transfer of the land Jesus suggests, transferring the land to new tenants, is less a matter of punitive justice than restorative justice. As Biblical scholar Walter Bruggemann explains, "sorting out what belongs to whom, and returning it to them."<sup>1</sup>

In both passages today, the test is quite simple: will we love God and neighbor? Will we live out that love of God and neighbor? The test is quite simple. But not easy. Moses tells the people that the commandments are only a test; however, they are not *only* the test they are also the answer key. They are the questions and the answers. We tend to think of Biblical law as a bit onerous. But the "rules" set up in Exodus (these Ten Commandments) are actually a gift to us. The fence around the pen marking the boundaries, keeping the sheep safely in the fold. These are the very rules that help us be the faithful tenants bearing good fruit of the kingdom Jesus is talking about. These laws are not punishment or hardship, but the key, the cheat-sheet for the test.

But the wicked tenants fail the test. And how do they fail the test? By rejecting the landowner by rejecting his messengers. In the same way we fail the test. By rejecting God. Rejecting God isn't a problem reserved for the religious elite of Jesus' time. Unfortunately, rejection of God wasn't solved by Jesus' death and resurrection. In the parable, Jesus equates the wicked tenants with the religious leaders of the day, but the religious leaders do not have the monopoly on rejection of God. The religious leaders are not the only ones to struggle with the test of loving God and neighbor. The wicked tenants live among us and, difficult though it is to admit, the wicked tenants live within us.

We don't need to look very far to see examples of rejecting God. A huge segment of our society rejects God outright. Books on atheism are bestsellers. There's even emerging movement of atheist evangelicals. And of course there's the substantial "spiritual but not religious" demographic.

But we're not atheists. We're not "spiritual but not religious." But even those of us striving to be God's faithful tenants manage to reject God in various ways. We reject God through ingratitude. In the parable, the landowner has provided everything for the tenants so they will reap a good harvest. The landowner planted the vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a wine press and built a watchtower. But the tenants are ungrateful, forgetting or perhaps simply not caring about all the landowner has done. Similarly, God has created this amazing

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Bruggemann, Sharon Parks, and Thomas Groome, *To Act Justly, Love Tenderly, Walk Humbly: An Agenda for Ministers* (New York: Paulist Press, 1986), 5.

world, blessed us with life, blessed us in so many ways, which we don't always appreciate. As one pastor notes, "This parable tells of a good God who fills the world with all that is needed for an abundant life. Once we feel empowered to make our own choices, we forget about the source of our gifts and act as if we have no responsibility to the giver."<sup>2</sup> We reject God when we forget or deny that all good gifts are from God.

And then there's rejecting God by rejecting neighbor, as one commentator notes, "Another way in which we reject God occurs when we reject some of God's people for reasons of our own. Human beings are capable of doing terrible things to other people whom they are somehow able to define as less worthy, less human, less valuable than themselves. If we can manage to turn another human being into the 'other,' there is no limit to what we will do or will allow to be done to them. We can be as brutal to one another as were the men who beat, stoned, and killed people in [today's passage]."<sup>3</sup>

And this is where the World Communion Sunday piece fits in. Every time we celebrate the Lord's Supper, we do so in communion with our brothers and sisters in Christ throughout the world and throughout ages. But on this particular Sunday, we are especially mindful of it. We are especially mindful that we are one family, all beloved children of God and we celebrate our unity. World Communion Sunday is a special reminder that part of the test, part of loving God, is loving our neighbor. And when we take the peacemaking offering next week, our offerings represent that love in action, caring for our neighbors, helping to unify all God's children. People will come from north and south and east and west to sit at Christ's table, even as we do here today.

The good news is, God is a God of second chances. As Frederick Buechner reminds us: "The one who judges us most finally will be the one who loves us most fully."<sup>4</sup> God is a God of second chances. So when we falter, when we don't manage to pass the test with flying colors—and we will falter—we always have the opportunity to try again. There's always a re-take.

So here's the test, it's a take home test: Do you love God? Do you love your neighbor? How are you living out that love? What fruits of the kingdom does your life bear?

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<sup>2</sup> Larry Maugh, "New Mercies Every Day," in *Disciplines: A Book of Daily Devotions 2011* (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 2010), 288.

<sup>3</sup> Marvin A. McMickle, *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Vol. 4 (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 143.

<sup>4</sup> Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), 48.