

*Texts: Mark 12:1-17*

*Subject: Parable of the Tenants; Taxes to Caesar*

*Theme: What's Mine is Mine*

*3 Lent; Mar. 15, 2020, Reformation Lutheran Church, Las Vegas, NV*

Grace and peace to you from God our father in heaven and the Lord Jesus,  
Amen.

This week has been a blur of activity. It's been one of those weeks that felt like a whole month - or more. Friday, after morning Bible study and making phone calls, getting school work done at home - a mostly normal Friday for us - we were taking it easy, and waiting for the sun to come out after the rain. Ivy and the kids and I took a walk up the street and around the block. We saw the weeds growing tall in many of the yards - they'll be burned up as the sun gets hot in a few weeks. We checked in on the people we love. We had dinner together and watched movies. We are aware of the privilege it is to have a safe place to go, food to eat, and people to care for us. It was good to be a little bit unplugged - if just for a short while.

The news has overwhelmed many of us, with ever changing reports from elected officials, health care experts, and local leaders on the rapidly spreading coronavirus. We struggled to know if we should remain open for worship here, meanwhile, Danny and Mary, and all of us were working hard to keep the place clean and safe for all who use this building. I've been checking in on church members and families, and while most seem to be doing well, there are those who have opted for the recommended 'social distance' out of concerns for their health and the health of others. I hope you've heard me say, if you are experiencing any symptoms at all, stay home, stay safe, we'll be here praying for you and with you. It's also cold and flu and allergy season. This is certainly a time to reach out with a phone call, check in with each other. If you know of someone

who is in need of help, call me, or call the church office, and let us know. We are here to help. It's been a little bit scary, and some are awash in panic - spending time in stores hoarding supplies like water, toilet paper, and hand sanitizer. *It's a good thing to be prepared, but not at the expense of our neighbors.* Events have been canceled, sports played in empty stadiums, and mixed messages from those in power seem to complicate things all the more. So many of us have nowhere to go, and are unsure of what to do with ourselves.

One thing we know to do is to gather and worship. One thing we do when we don't know what else to do is to turn to the Word. You can't hoard Jesus. There's plenty for everyone. So we turn to the word - and we get this difficult parable. Two weeks ago, we heard Jesus *teaching* about what it takes to inherit eternal life. Last week we heard a story of *serving and healing blind Bartimaeus*. We're jumping ahead a bit in the narrative - Jesus has already entered Jerusalem, overturned the tables in the temple and chief priests and scribes and elders have questioned His authority. Today, it's a story about *giving to God* - the parable of the wicked tenants.

Jesus tells the religious rulers this story: These tenants were occupying a vineyard, and when the owner came to collect his share of the produce, they beat up and killed the servants sent to gather up what was rightly owed. They didn't want to give up anything to this absentee owner. In their greed, they even murdered the owner's Son. Jesus tells this story to these important people, the ones who know the law, they know the rules, they would know the reference too. This story of a vineyard would certainly remind them of the vineyard according to the prophet Isaiah. They might as well call it the *parable of Israel* - they *are* the vineyard. So the landowner is God - but if

we follow that too deep, we notice that the landowner here is absent, and keeps sending his servants - to get beat up or killed - that doesn't seem wise. Are they the prophets? The son is even killed, but how can the tenants think that this would mean they would inherit the land? One way this parable has been taught leans toward an understanding that is anti-semitic- that condemns the Jewish people for not recognizing the Son, Jesus and killing Him just like these wicked tenants - understand that this is not what it's about. This is a messy parable that leads to more questions than answers.

Why would they act this way in the first place? I have to imagine they were afraid. The tenants were afraid of losing what they had. Those religious leaders in Jerusalem were afraid of losing their authority and were locked into a system that they couldn't or wouldn't change on their own.

We get afraid too. We cling to what we know, what we can control.

Maybe you've been to the big stores in the last week or so, even the supermarkets and the dollar stores are running out of stocks of needed items like hand sanitizer, bottled water, and toilet paper. There's fear that the system of commerce might be delayed, and being as globally connected as we are, it's possible that difficulties overseas will affect the goods and services available to people in U.S. The stock market has dropped significantly and that will lead to real pain for many who depend on those accounts for income in retirement. Consumer confidence - the opposite of anxiety - has a great effect on our financial systems. The world we live in is changing by the day - and if you're worried about that, know that you're not alone. We are in this together. Some have lived without for a long time. We don't all suffer the same.

Jesus completes the story by quoting psalm 118 - “the stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone.” .What they thought would happen would not come to pass. What Jesus has come to do doesn’t fit in nice and neat with the systems of the day or their expectations. The systems of the day, like those tables in the temple would be overturned, one way or another. Expectations would be exceeded.

Jesus is in Jerusalem. Three times He’s told his disciples that He’s going to be killed, and three days later will rise again. This is not the end of the story at all. Jesus goes on teaching, and the Pharisees and some loyal to Herod wanted to catch Jesus on inciting a revolt, so they asked him if they should pay taxes to Caesar. They try to get on His good side, say some nice things they don’t really mean. Jesus asks them to produce a denarius - a coin, since He didn’t have one. “Whose head is this, and whose title?” he asked them. It was the emperor’s face on that coin. It was well known that Jews had a law against making images - they would have had their own coins - this was the job of money changers in the temple - to convert Roman coins into funds to be used to pay the temple fees, or for an offering. And engraved on the coin was the title, ‘son of god’ and ‘high priest.’ They’re not asking Jesus if it’s okay to pay taxes to the empire - they’re asking Jesus - who is the real Son of God? Who is the real High Priest?

Jesus doesn’t tell them *not to* pay the tax. N.T. Wright notes that Jesus’ answer echoes a saying from the Maccabean revolt - “Give the pagans what they deserve” - meaning *revenge*. Jesus seems to tell them, that if they participate in this system under the empire, then they will get what they deserve. *Pay the tax*. They will live and die by the rules of that system - they will suffer and succeed, based on their loyalty to that

system. But with God - there is another way: "Give to God the things that are God's."

What belongs to God?

Yes, all of it. *The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it. (Psalm 24)*

When we're in the middle of massive change, anxious times, and uncertainty, we're also trying to figure things out. What do we need? What must we hold onto? What can we do? It's hard to make the right decisions, or know which way is best. When we see our reality through a lens of scarcity, we will never have enough. We will hoard and fear, and hurt others to get what we think we need. We will fall victim to the evil of the world, and be locked into systems of injustice whether we like it or not. When disease and disaster strike, we will only be as good as things we own. In those difficult moments, if we can see the world a little differently, through a lens of generosity, through our common humanity, and with even just a little bit of faith in the power of the risen Jesus in our reality, we get a glimpse of what it's like to live abundant life here and now, and live into the promise of new life that Jesus brings. Jesus came into our reality and upended the system of sin and death. Jesus saw the wickedness we inflicted on one another, our fear and greed and hypocrisy, loved us still, and died for the sake of this broken and beat up world. As ones claimed in baptism, we are given the Spirit that we might drop the mentality that says, "What's mine is mine" and live for something other than ourselves, care about the needs of those around us, and give our very lives that others would know the love and peace and healing in Jesus Christ.

Right now this abundant life looks like *not* shaking hands. It looks like an empty stadium. It looks like sending a meal to a neighbor who is alone and grieving. It looks like sharing what we have when others don't have enough. It looks like putting down the

phone and logging off social media and turning off the news to play a game or chase a kid, or teach someone something new. It looks like neighbors singing from balconies and exhausted nurses and doctors, and friends who put aside differences to laugh and work together.

This life that we live is not ours in the first place. It *all* belongs to God. It *all belongs to God*. Following Jesus looks like giving it all back to the ones God loves.