“What do you think you own?” - Stephanie Sorge, 3/3/24

Welcome to discipleship. Tensions are rising for Jesus in Jerusalem, so of course, he tells a story. The meaning is clear! Or at least it was to his original audience. The priests, scribes, and elders are acting like they own the place, but they’re just tenants. Jesus is the true heir. That’s all the authority he needs. The religious leaders get angry, because they know this parable is against them. It calls out their behavior and foretells that this vineyard - the one they think they own - will be taken from them and given to others.

This is a messy parable. It touches on religious and political tensions in Jesus’s day and through the present. Christian interpreters have often read this with the hermeneutic that Christians have superseded Jews as God’s chosen people. They screwed it up, and even killed the son of God, so it has been taken from them and entrusted to those who stayed loyal to Jesus, the true heir. Let’s go ahead and reject that dangerous and irresponsible theology, shall we?

Maybe we should reject this whole parable, or allegory, or whatever it is Mark is trying to do here. Is God the absent landlord? Who put in the long days of work in the fields? Who really deserves the fruit of the labor? The landlord could be seen as another far-away authority figure, squeezing the workers for their profits, without whom there would be no profits to share. He sends his foot soldiers to collect the tax. Is the landlord Caesar of this vineyard? What kind of a person keeps sending his hired helpers to be beaten and killed, and then his own son? The parable was problematic then and now because it’s built on the scaffolding of systems of oppression and inequality.

Speaking of systems of oppression and wealth inequality, let’s talk taxes! This is another question designed to trap Jesus. If he says the people should pay taxes to Caesar, he’s taking the side of the Empire, and if he says they shouldn’t, well, that’s treason. Also, Caesar claimed the title “Son of God.” Carrying coins with his image was basically carrying little graven idols. Jesus isn’t even doing that. The fact that he has to ask the religious leaders to bring him a coin illustrates who is really operating within the realm of Caesar.

I wonder what Jesus would say to Alabama’s Chief Supreme Court Justice, Tom Parker. I’ve been scratching my head ever since hearing an interview with him in which he said, ”God created government. And the fact that we have let it go into the possession of others, it's heartbreaking for those of us who understand.”[[1]](#footnote-1) I must confess my Biblical ignorance, I guess, because I just can’t recall where God created government. Which government? How did we get possession of it, and when did we lose it? I’m so confused. Is the government God’s or Caesar’s?

I was discussing this passage with a colleague who heard Walter Brueggemann retell this story. Brueggemann imagines Jesus’s aside to the crowd. “Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s (and everything is God’s.)” That tracks with our understanding of possessions and stewardship. Everything belongs to God, so God’s interest in human matters is understandable.

Governments impact creation and humanity in huge ways. They uphold laws that either promote or hinder justice. They initiate wars and broker peace. They establish policies that impact the environment. Governments have the potential to help and hinder, benefit and harm. Of course, God cares about all of that, and we should too, right? But how?

In last Sunday’s Post, E.J. Dionne highlighted a particular conflict of faith values in the House of Representatives. In an interview with Sean Hannity, Speaker of the House Mike Johnson said, “I am a Bible-believing Christian. Go pick up a Bible off your shelf and read it. That’s my worldview. That’s what I believe.” In response, Representative Rosa DeLauro “wants to invite [Johnson] to a dialogue on what taking the Bible seriously means.”[[2]](#footnote-2) It’s not a new conflict. People of any faith often find themselves in disagreement with other adherents of the same faith, with reasons and motivations derived from the same texts and traditions, leading to very different conclusions.

In a few minutes we’ll read from the Barmen Declaration, written as a protest against Hitler’s attempts to homogenize, centralize, and control the Church in Germany. Prior to Hitler’s rise to power, state churches were supported heavily by taxes at the national, state, and local levels. The extreme economic dependence of churches on the state made the churches that much more likely to follow the money and keep in line with the government. When what is God’s depends not on God but on Caesar, or Kaiser, to whom does it really belong? Does God give us government, or does the government give us God?

Thanks to the Alabama Supreme Court’s prominence in recent days, I learned about the Seven Mountains Mandate, a movement with which Chief Justice Parker and Speaker Mike Johnson affiliate. I might not have known the movement by name, but it puts a name to what we’ve certainly experienced. According to Wikipedia, “The movement is believed by its followers to have begun in 1975 with a purported message from God delivered to evangelicals [Loren Cunningham](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Loren_Cunningham), [Bill Bright](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bill_Bright), and [Francis Schaeffer](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Francis_Schaeffer) ordering them to invade the "seven spheres" of society identified as family, religion, education, media, entertainment, business, and government.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

We see this in the rise of domestic Christian Nationalism and its call to make the United States a Christian nation. That looks like centering cisheteronormative patriarchal families who can be educated, entertained, and informed by Christian values. This is the impulse behind book bans and the activists who seek at all levels to do widespread cleansing of any ideas or portrayals of ideas or lifestyles that conflict with their values. Is this sounding closer and closer to home?

Speaking of close to home, Loren Cunningham, who died a few months ago, was the father of one of my aunts - my mom’s sister-in-law. I have multiple aunts and uncles who are now or who have been involved with the organization he started, Youth With a Mission, or YWAM. If that name sounds familiar, you might have heard about last week’s tragedy in Tanzania, in which a school bus of YWAM leaders was involved in an accident, with at least 11 killed. A local friend who was part of YWAM is deeply grieving those losses. When she shared the story, I immediately pulled up the news to see if I recognized any family names. I didn’t, but that doesn’t make it less tragic.

Or maybe YWAM sounds familiar because it’s the group that runs the mission in Baja, Mexico, with which churches from our presbytery have been working for decades. We heard a lot about that at last week’s meeting. YWAM does some really meaningful work that has changed lives. According to one person interviewed following the bus accident, women who would have likely been child brides in Tanzania are now working as nurses, doctors, teachers, lawyers, and pastors because of YWAM’s work.[[4]](#footnote-4) That’s amazing! I’m not trying to paint it all with the same broad brush strokes, but at the same time, the connection with Christian dominionism gives me pause.

It also might invite us to take a closer look at our own actions and associations. Just as I was working on this sermon, I received an email advertising a forthcoming book: “Baptizing America: How Mainline Protestants Help Build Christian Nationalism.” An excerpt promises to "reveal how the issue of Christian Nationalism does not reside solely within Trumpian circles or the churches that have vociferously embraced the former president. If we are honest, at times in our own ministries we have also been part of the problem.”[[5]](#footnote-5)

It’s a tricky dance! On one hand, we’re here to be shaped and formed by the values of Christ, and then sent out to live into them as faithfully as we can. This means that we’re living out our faith within all the same spheres of interest as the Seven Mountain Movement. We are not supposed to withdraw from the world and its empires. We are called to live within it but in a radically different way.

The vineyard parable is problematic because it’s rooted in human economic systems that shape and uphold inequality and injustice. That is Caesar’s territory, not God’s. People were expecting a political leader and savior. Instead, they got Jesus. He interacted with and unmasked the evils of the death-dealing powers of his day, but he came to fundamentally upend things, not to take them over. We are not taking over what is Caesar’s for God. We’re living as stewards recognizing God’s claim on everything. This shapes our public and private life, individual and corporate relationships, and how we engage in politics, too.

How do we know the difference? Would you be shocked to hear that Bonhoeffer had some relevant writings? From his *Ethics*: “Those who act on the basis of ideology consider themselves justified by their idea. Those who act responsibly place their action into the hands of God and live by God’s grace and judgment.”[[6]](#footnote-6)

Partisanship, tribalism, and devout ideological loyalty belong to Caesar. When we center God in our lives, made known to us in Jesus Christ, then we can give to God what belongs to God. (Which is everything.) I pray that what we do here changes what we do when we leave here. I hope that as the body of Christ, we are seeking to walk that different path together. If we yield to God our lives, our wills, and all that we think we own, then we can become instruments of God’s will and work in the world. And if we screw up? Then we fall back on God’s abundant grace. Welcome to discipleship.

1. https://www.npr.org/2024/02/27/1233968467/alabama-supreme-court-ivf-treatment-christian-nationalist [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2024/02/25/mike-johnson-religion-christianity-delauro/ [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Seven\_Mountain\_Mandate [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. https://julieroys.com/a-staggering-loss-11-ywam-leaders-killed-in-bus-accident-in-tanzania/ [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. https://chalicepress.com/products/baptizing-america [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. From Bonhoeffer’s *Ethics*, p. 187 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)