



# SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE EIGHTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, JULY 31, 2022  
HOSEA 11:1-11; PSALM 107:1-9,43; COLOSSIANS 3:1-11; LUKE 12:13-21

## THE TANGLE

**Luke 12:13-21** [*Someone in the crowd said to Jesus, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me." But he said to him, "Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?" And he said to them, "Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions." Then he told them a parable: "The land of a rich man produced abundantly. And he thought to himself, 'What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?' Then he said, 'I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, 'Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.' But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?' So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God."*]

Suspend your disbelief with me for a moment, if you will... Imagine a group of students, who have had no contact whatsoever with this dominant western culture. Imagine they showed up in the United States with an interest in learning about those of us who live here and have been shaped by this cultural reality. What do you think they'd make of us, here, in 2022? If they were to interview a bunch of people, for their studies, ask them about the things that are *most* important, that they *love*, ask them about what makes life worth living, I wonder what they each might talk about.

As one shaped by this culture, I'm *guessing* there would be talk of the importance of love, of spirituality and faith, family, and friends, of vocation, the beauty of the natural world and of music and art, of good food. I'm guessing they'd hear about the things people love to *do* and create; about the importance of the connections they have to those in their lives, and to their companion animals, to the places they call home, to their stories, to their love of nature.

This might be some of what they'd hear... but what would they be observing?

They would undoubtedly see violence, a lot of violence; they would see enormous differences in standards of living, some with *great* wealth, whilst many are forced to live in unrelenting poverty. They would see people stressed and working long hours and buying a lot of stuff. They would see large-scale industrialization, and incarceration, militarization, inhumane factory farming, and pollution, ecological degradation, and the unjust way most human beings, here, live in relationship with one another and with the planet.

They would hear talk of the things people love, the things they *say* are so important, but perhaps not witness that truth in the way life is lived. This seeming contradiction: human life as it's *actually* lived compared to the human life so passionately hoped for by so many... this contradiction has mystified generations of thinkers. In his letter to the Romans, Paul writes, "I do not understand my own actions. For I do the very thing I hate. I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do."<sup>1</sup>

It can be tempting to resolve this apparent contradiction by simply 'pointing the finger,' *laying the blame* on individual moral or ethical failures: on greed or selfishness, for example... It can be equally tempting to

blame an ideology: capitalism, socialism, neo-liberalism. Simple as that. But it's not that simple, is it? Reality, as we know from our own experience of our own lives, reality is never simple. Each of our thoughts and actions, and the reasons behind them, are the result of more influencing factors than we could *ever* identify. Our lives as we live them, our choices and our actions, get all tangled up, they become entangled with material and economic realities, with ideologies, with our histories.

In this culture, *we* might struggle to understand our inability to do the things we know we really should, but perhaps our student observers, from an entirely different cultural reality, perhaps for them they see no issue, perhaps they think in ways that are very different to ours. For those of us who learned to think in this dominant culture, we have been taught to keep things tidy, and, if possible, simple. We have been taught that if we just try hard enough, we can reduce anything complicated into nice, simpler bits, and that simpler bits are always better because they're easier to understand.

The scientific method insists we *isolate our variables*, right? Especially if we want to change or manipulate something. In this

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<sup>1</sup> Romans 7:15, 19

dominant culture, we want to make things simple.

And so, thinking of ourselves as *entangled* offers us a distinctly counter-cultural way of thinking about our reality, resisting any such simplicity. Seeing our lives, the ways we live, the decisions we make as a *tangle*, acknowledges our reality *cannot* be made simple; our reality *is* an entanglement of our actions, with our experiences; our preferences, with our material and economic realities; our hopes, with our faiths, and our abilities and our identities, our histories. We can change the overall shape of it, but we can't ever untangle it. And, perhaps, neither should we want to, because the tangle *is* life, perhaps life wouldn't hold the creative potential it does if it were neatly and tidily, flatly, combed out.

Let's assume our observing students are, in fact, attuned to this idea of entanglement, they might naturally ask some additional questions to more fully understand us as a tangled whole. Because *all of it* is part of the tangle – our actions, and our behaviors are all entangled.

To fill out the tangled shape of us, the interviewees might be asked about what they fear, what causes them pain, emotional pain, they might be asked where they find safety.

Some may say they fear the unknown, or change, some may fear isolation, illness, violence, they may fear losing their housing, not having enough, to feed their families or cover the costs of an unknown future, or enough money to take care of themselves in their old age or if they get sick.

They may feel pain when or if their fears are realized, they may feel pain when confronted by their traumas, or witnessing the suffering of others, or they may feel pain in the form of guilt or shame or regret.

... and some of them might describe feeling safe when they feel neither pain nor fear, when they don't feel vulnerable, when they're in control, perhaps when they work hard, when they're productive, or when they feel they're of value, when they have *the stuff* they need, when they are able to close the door of their own space, or when they're in familiar places doing familiar things with familiar people.

And our observers might ask many more questions; and *listening* to all the responses they fill out the tangled picture of this dominant culture; perceiving the necessary complexity, that actions and behaviors are entangled with beliefs, and experiences and all the rest of it.

What does all this tangled up thinking have to do with the gospel? How might seeing our

lives, our reality, as an entanglement, help us as we strive for conversion of life, how might it work for us as we work for God's kingdom reality?

I think, importantly, it might help us step decisively and definitively away from the impulse to judge. In a culture where simplicity of thinking dominates, where it's assumed one thing *clearly and obviously* leads to another, judgment is rife. If we see our reality as a tangle, an entanglement of *all* that *is* each of us, judgement can be imagined as a hard yank on a single thread within the tangle, a sharp tug in one place that forces a tight knot to form somewhere else in the bundle, and this is most likely felt as some form of pain.

Jesus *holds* the entangled mess of our lives and our realities, our faith and our fears, and his teachings tease out certain threads, changing the overall shape of who and what we are, whilst taking care *not* to create new knots of pain. When Jesus teaches in parables, like the one we heard today, he teaches in response to certain people in certain contexts, and he does so, I believe, to avoid that sharp, knot-forming, tug.

Jesus' teachings are multidimensional and tangled just as we are multi-dimensional and tangled; they do not speak *simply* to any one single behavior that can be isolated and pulled cleanly out of the tangled-up whole.

Jesus perceives and understands our fears, our worries, our loves, and our hopes, he sees our fullness, not only our actions, not only our behaviors. Jesus does not acknowledge our worries and fears, see our mistakes and the ways we fall short to then knot us up, painfully, with shame and guilt as a way to force us to change. And we should not do that to ourselves, or to one another.

Jesus does not come to add to the fear we already have or to the pain we already know. Jesus comes in love.

For sure, this does not mean Jesus' teaching is easy, or that the changes we all need to make are small or insignificant. Jesus is the unrelenting yet loving force that changes us by changing our overall shape, the shape of our tangle - and *we are called* to be receptive to that, to allow ourselves to be changed *by* him; *and ...* we are called to resist the painful distortions to our shape that are the result, always, of mistakenly asking of, and seeking in the world, the safety and the certainty we should only ever seek in God.