



Jamaica Methodist District

Holy Week 2020 Meditation Series

MEDITATION FOR THE TUESDAY OF HOLY WEEK 2020

DISSED PROPRIETOR (MARK 12: 1 – 12)

I am sure that several of you must have heard persons talking about their being "dissed". When I was a boy growing up "dissed" was not a word in my vocabulary. Being dissed was not a commonly expression. However today, persons use the word with reference to incidents where they believe that others have shown them "disrespect." Dissed persons feel hurt, offended, insulted, ridiculed, belittled.

There are occasions when quite innocently persons are accused of dissing others. It is like the retired school teacher who goes into a lawyer's office to discuss a personal matter. She believed she should be attended to as soon as she arrived for her appointment. However, the young receptionist greeted her with the news that "they were running a little bit late." He invited her to take a seat and be patient. She would soon be attended to. This resulted in her complaining to all and sundry in the waiting room that professional people nowadays do not know what it means to respect time. When she eventually had audience with the lawyer, she blurted out: "That receptionist of yours dissed me. What a rude young man! You should get rid of him forthwith. Has he no respect for my age?"

Dissing may not be intentional, as perhaps it was not in this incident of the teacher and the receptionist. However, there are those times when expressions in word are intended to embarrass others. For example, in a small downtown business establishment, the young secretary did not take kindly to the accountant whom she perceived as rivalling her for her boss's affection. So, at the end of the year office party, she seized the moment. Just as they were about to open presents and exchange greetings, she turned to the accountant and said, but not in soft tones: "Miss Dawkins, that outfit you're wearing looks just like one I dumped in the garbage last week."

Dissing someone, when it is done verbally can hurt terribly. But dissing could be done without words; it could be persons' actions that indicate an individual has been dissed. Think for example how slighted the Member of Parliament of a constituency would feel if he were invited as one of the guests at an official



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function but was given the silent treatment by the Master of Ceremonies. Protocol would dictate that within such a setting, the MC in addressing the assembly would acknowledge the political representative of the people, along with the other dignitaries. But at this function, there was no recognition given of the MP's presence. The MC treated him as a nonentity who did not have the right to be singled out for mention.

We are on the third day of Holy Week, and we are retracing the steps of Jesus on his way to the cross. Tradition has it that on this day Jesus told some parables, one of which was about wicked tenants in a vineyard. Two of the other Gospels, Matthew and Luke, also record this parable. I want to focus particularly on the proprietor, the one who owned the vineyard. Not only was he a planter; he was a developer, for apart from establishing the vineyard, he made sure that there was a pit for a wine press and a watchtower. Like so many of us in the year 2020, he was security conscious and very concerned about the safety of his possessions. He fenced the property. As I look at several of the gated communities in Kingston, with the concrete wall surrounding, I see the watchtower idea reflected in the guardhouse for the security personnel. Was this proprietor whom Jesus told of in the parable a man ahead of his time?

The proprietor in the story Jesus told, went abroad to another country, leaving tenants to cultivate the land. In our Caribbean history we are familiar with the phenomenon of absentee landlords. During the era of slavery, there were those planter elite who were overseers of sugar estates, but they did not own the property. They were stewards. The rightful owners either lived in England or had their children educated in England. Whether there was much resemblance to the picture painted by Jesus in the parable, the commonality though was that the proprietor, by virtue of the arrangement made with the planter, had a legal entitlement to the produce of the land. In the story told by Jesus, the time came when the absentee proprietor sent a representative (*slave* is the description used in Mark's gospel) but his representative, nevertheless, was sent to collect his share of the produce. But the proprietor was virtually dissed. The disrespect for the proprietor was evident, not just in words spoken but in the actions that were meted out to his representative. In fact, his representative was seized, beaten and sent away empty handed.



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The dissed proprietor must have thought: "There is some misunderstanding why they disrespected my representative." So, he sent another person to represent him and rightfully collect what was his due. This slave met with a similar fate - they insulted him, yes dissed him verbally, and put a beating on him, so much that he could only get up and beat a retreat as fast as he could. This sort of scenario repeated itself, as representative after representative was cruelly treated, and kicked off the property empty handed. In the parable, we are told that one or two of them even lost their lives in the process. The dissed proprietor considered the situation. After careful consideration, he instituted what he thought was a change in tactic. "If I send my son", he reasoned, "they will surely treat him with greater respect." But he had miscalculated. The appearance on the scene of the proprietor's son, the one who was the legitimate heir to the vineyard, winepress pit, watchtower, everything, aroused anger. The tenants, no doubt fueled by the fact of the proprietor's continued absence, were determined that he must have nothing. They would fight to have everything - the entire property with its produce - for their own benefit. So, they killed the proprietor's son.

The dissed proprietor must be commended for his patient endurance. Or was it sheer folly? Imagine, having suffered blow after blow when his representatives were either inhumanely treated or murdered, he still sent his own flesh and blood, thinking that he would receive some respect from them. However, there had to come a time when his cool temperament would explode and explode it did. According to the narrative in the Gospels, he came and "destroyed" the tenants. The form of destruction was not spelt out, so we may speculate that he had them put to death. After all, they had murdered his son. So, they paid with their own lives. In their stead, the proprietor arranged with a fresh set of tenants to look after his property. These, no doubt, were scrutinized to avoid a repeat of what took place.

By telling this parable of the dissed proprietor, Jesus had a message that he wanted to share with his Jewish listeners. His listeners included some of his worst critics - chief priests, scribes, elders - persons who rejected his claims to be the Messiah. So, with reference to the parable, he concluded: "the stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. This was the Lord's doing and it is amazing in our eyes." In other words, you who claim to be versed in the Jewish Scriptures, who believe you know everything about God and the coming Messiah,



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you who are convinced that it is YOU who will inherit the kingdom, beware. You reject the Son of God; hence your inheritance will be given, not to the Jewish nation, but others, who are Gentiles.

The parable points to what Jesus' impending crucifixion was about. The Jewish rejection of the prophets who spoke about the Messiah, the scant courtesy they paid to John the Baptist, the forerunner of the Christ, and now their rejection of the one who, throughout his earthly ministry, was undoubtedly the Messiah. Could they not see by his words spoken, his miracles performed, his acts of love, not hate, his compassion for people - for individuals as well as crowds - could they not acknowledge that this was indeed the Messiah, the Son of the living God?

I find it interesting to note the response of the dissed proprietor in the parable. It may be that Jesus was going to use his reaction to what had happened to teach them and us today about God the Father. The proprietor's behaviour, apart from his initial display of patient endurance, ran counter to what we observe about God. The parable was pointing to the crucifixion. When dissed by the Jews, who invented charges against Jesus to bring before the authorities, his eventual reaction was not violent. This is where we can look ahead to what was to take place on the cross. God was not going to utterly crush or destroy the enemies of Jesus, the Son. Instead, we are impressed even today by what was a gentle response. Jesus, God's heir, as he hung bleeding on the cross, could find it in his heart to forgive: "Father, forgive them!" God the Son, the one who came from the bosom of the Father, the one who declared, indeed who made God known to the world, could testify on the cross to the mercy, forgiveness and love of the God whom we worship today.

There is an ongoing debate in many nations about capital punishment. Should, for example, a murderer be forgiven? The dissed proprietor, by his eventual reaction of destroying those who had criminally beaten and killed his representatives, would suggest that murderers and felons of all sorts should pay the price. They should be executed. And this is the challenge we face today, because when we base our argument upon the God revealed to us in Jesus Christ, we must admit that the message of forgiveness is uppermost. Several voices, echoing the merciful, forgiving, loving God have been raised in support of giving a second chance to offenders.



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What I see in the parable as the action of the dissed proprietor, is that when the crime is committed against you, or a family member, when it directly affects YOU, forgiveness talk does not easily come out of your mouth. You may say, intellectually, that "the vilest offender may turn and find grace." You may sing enthusiastically "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me." But deep down in your heart, you are paining because you really want revenge. This is what we see as families' response in so many cases where criminals are given "light sentences" for murdering relatives. Yes, it is not easy, but Jesus' knowledge of human nature is such that he would recommend that you and I endeavour to forgive, not just seven times, but seventy times seven. In other words, for us to arrive at that state where we are merciful to the point of mirroring the actions of the Son of God, we've got to be consistent in our efforts to forgive and forgive and forgive. It's like that one of our Methodist doctrinal emphases which states: "All persons can be saved to the uttermost/ completely." It's a doctrine which affirms that you and I can reach that stage in our spiritual journey when we attest to loving God with all our heart, all our soul, all our mind and all our strength, and loving neighbour as self.

If, like the proprietor in the parable, you are dissed, what is supposed to be your response? God in Christ suggests love, mercy and forgiveness. And, lest we forget, how often do we disrespect God, by the things we say and do, or by what we neglect to do? How often do we fail to witness for God in Christ, denying that we are his and behaving as those who have not met Christ? How often do we disrespect God by betrayal, hankering after things that could give material wealth to us, and allowing moral and ethical values to count for nothing?

During this season of Lent and particularly now during Holy Week, let us continue to focus on the Cross and receive the messages that are coming from it. In so doing you and I will be better servants of God, the proprietor, who owns everything in this world and who has placed us, as stewards, in charge of it. Rest assured that if your gaze and mine is fixed on the cross, we will be doing that which accords with God's will. It will result in our bringing honour, glory and praises to the name of the one true God. Amen!