

OSLC Sermon 10 08 2017

Isaiah 5:1-7; Psalm 80:7-15; Philippians 3:4b-14;
Matthew 21:33-46

Grace to you and peace...

Every preacher I know struggling this week – another week of unrelenting violence and resulting grief – and texts that themselves are riddled with violence.

Where is the good news in a week such as this...that we face with more and more regularity? When multiple disasters cover the world and the daily news tells the stories of the victims of senseless violence...do we respond with the numbness and despair that seems inevitable? Do we turn away from the suffering of the world and tightly focus on the success of our own little circle: our family; our friends; our work; our church – those places where it seems we can exercise some control?

In God's wisdom, scripture gives us a song and story to guide us in our struggle.

God is grieving over the vineyard. Therein lays our hope.

“Let me sing for my beloved my love-song concerning his vineyard,” says the prophet Isaiah, and we hear the song alongside the parable that Jesus tells.

Both song and story speak of God's vineyard – a symbol of God's good work of creation and the people of Israel. Because of the

nature of the literature we need to hold the words lightly, letting their meaning flow as they work their influence. God's people are both the fruit of the love song *and* the tenants of the parable.

In both song and story the landowner carefully and tenderly provides for the vineyard; preparing the land, planting the vines, providing for its protection, and anticipating the harvest – good tenants bearing good fruit.

What more could the landowner have done? In both song and story, the yield is sour grapes and violence.

It is harvest time, in our climate zone here in the Midwest, and in Matthew's gospel, as the conflicting demands of God's reign and the realm of empire escalate in tension. The question is the same for us as for the religious leaders and authorities of ancient Israel.

What does it look like to tend God's vineyard faithfully, and to bear sweet fruit from the generous providence of God? What do we owe in service to the source of our abundance?

Jesus invites the people to "listen to another parable." In this case Jesus does not invoke it as an image of the reign of God – "the kingdom of heaven is like..." but rather lays out a story of rebellion and violence; a rejection of the landowner's claim to the produce of the vineyard. According to the values of Empire, "might makes right," and greed wins the day. Violence begets violence.

The religious leaders have acclimated to the ways of Empire, seeking their own comfort and security rather than following the ways of God. Jesus is disrupting the carefully balanced peace, threatening the status quo, and pointing out both the bad fruit and the unfaithful tenants in God's vineyard. The chief priests reject Jesus, just as the leaders before them rejected the warnings of God's prophets. As we hear from some leaders today, "Death and destruction is simply the price of freedom."

Jesus' parable sets up a story of violence followed by more violence, and then invites the hearers to anticipate the righteous response of the landowner. Having blurred the lines between God's values and the realm of Empire, they respond with a particular view of what is just – surely the landowner will respond to evil with evil!

And we harken back to the Beloved's love song: "The Lord of hosts expected justice, but saw bloodshed; righteousness, but heard a cry!"

The chief priests and Pharisees have so internalized the ideology of empire that it has become their theology.

Like the "faithful" legislator who piously opposes abortion in public, while privately urging his mistress to abort the child of their adultery.

Or the self-righteous leaders who decry the waste in government, promising to give the people their money back by slashing taxes...while using costly military planes for their personal travel.

Or those who claim the high ground of protecting the Second Amendment while at the same time taking away access to health care that will treat the victims of gun violence.

Or, in fact, like any of us who offer our thoughts and prayers to victims of violence or environmental destruction while refusing to address the weapons of mass shootings, or the behaviors that cause climate disruption.

All of us are caught in the tension between the values of Empire and the values of God's reign. It is no surprise that we have a hard time imagining anything other than continued escalation of violence.

I wonder if the chief priests and Pharisees realized that they had indicted themselves when they predicted the violent judgment of the returning landowner? It calls to mind King David who convicted himself by his response to Nathan's tale of the wealthy man who took the poor man's one beloved lamb rather than sacrifice from his own abundance. Filled with anger at the injustice of the story, Nathan called out David for his similar behavior with Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah. Atta ha ish – You are the man! – said Nathan, as David implicated himself and his own unrighteousness.

And yet. Jesus interrupts the cycle with these words. "Have you never read in the scriptures: 'The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord's doing, and it is amazing in our eyes'?"

That changes everything. God can and does work differently than Empire. God's response to rejection is resurrection, not revenge. Anticipating his own rejection by the tenants of the vineyard, and his own death at the hands of Empire, Jesus promises another way. And it continues to amaze us, almost beyond acceptance.

You see, rather than either destroying the vineyard out of righteous wrath, or even letting the vineyard languish into inevitable decay, God will always gift the reign of God to whomever bears the good fruit of the kingdom. When those who are expected to yield justice yield bloodshed instead, God finds others who will live into the righteousness God longs for.

There is no distinction. Sinners, tax collectors, prostitutes, repentant captains of Empire, misguided and renewed colluders...any who turn away from evil and violence toward the values of God's reign are welcomed, restored, replanted in the vineyard. The "ah-ha" moment when we recognize our complicity with the violent quid pro quo of empire is the moment of our release from bondage to death and decay and our restoration to God's righteousness. Our capacity to bear good fruit is renewed.

In the face of another week of unrelenting violence, let us turn away from the numbness and despair that are the growing place of yet more violence.

Let us dwell instead in the reign of God and refuse to participate in the Empire's law of retributive violence – a good guy with a gun to stop a bad one. Let us work together, holding ourselves and our leaders to a higher standard and a third way – the way of

Jesus that leads beyond death to life. Like the Apostle Paul, let us forget what lies behind and strain forward to what lies ahead, pressing on toward the goal – that is the reign of God, the heavenly call, incarnate in Christ Jesus.

Amen.