

Sermon on Matthew 21:33-46
Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost, October 8, 2017
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson

How do we understand the rich lessons of scripture today, as we worship in the aftermath of another mass shooting, killing 58 people and wounding 500 in Las Vegas last Sunday night, with a nation in turmoil over politics and race, seeking direction in the midst of division? For we always interpret God's Word in a context: of what is going on in our personal lives, church and community, and what is happening in our nation and world. So at any given time, we might read a familiar passage differently – from the Christmas story, the Easter story, or this famous parable of *The Workers of the Vineyard*.

Matthew wrote this gospel in a context, too: it was just after the Romans had destroyed Jerusalem and sent the people of Israel into another exile, following the great Jewish revolt against Rome. The promised land where God had planted the people and the City of David were now destroyed – it had to have been traumatic! In the Old Testament we often see the people of Israel referred to as a vine, or a vineyard. We heard in our first reading from Isaiah God's love song for the vineyard he had created for Israel and Judah. Isaiah and other prophets warned the people what would happen if they turned away from God, and did not bear fruit. Generations later, the people of Matthew's church had witnessed the destruction of their homeland, God's vineyard, Israel, including God's Temple on Mount Zion and the Holy City, torn down brick by brick, with great loss of life. Its leaders killed and its people sold into slavery, not much was left - like any country after a destructive war. Because that's what victors do to their enemies.

So the setting Matthew gives us for the parable is that Jesus was teaching in the Temple of Jerusalem after his triumphant entry on Palm Sunday, hailed as "The Son of David" by crowds of people. The blind and the lame had come to him for healing, which made the leaders angry, because they saw him as a threat, disturbing the peace and tranquility of God's house. It was a chaotic and dangerous situation. The leaders asked Jesus by whose authority he was teaching, but his answer was evasive. He asked them whether John's baptism came from heaven or from himself? They didn't dare answer, because of the crowds.

So Jesus told them this parable about a landowner who planted a vineyard, leased it to tenants, and went to a far country. At harvest time, he sent slaves to collect his rent from the tenants, but they beat one, killed another, and stoned another. The landowner sent more slaves, and the tenants did the same to them. Finally, the landowner sent his son, thinking they would respect him – but the tenants seized him and killed him. "What should the landowner do to these tenants?" Jesus

asked the people. “They should be killed,” they said. Then Jesus quoted scripture to them: “*The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord’s doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes!* So the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom.” The leaders would have arrested him, but for the crowds, who regarded Jesus as a prophet.

Most of us would agree with the crowd, that the tenants who killed the landowners slaves and even his son, to hold onto the vineyard for themselves, deserved to die. They should get justice, and pass on the vineyard to others, who would take better care of it. That would be fair. Revenge is sweet, we think. Like after the destruction on 9-11, when terrorists took down the twin towers of the World Trade Center in 2001, we all thought it was right to get revenge swiftly, and most of us supported the attack on the Taliban and Al-Quaida in Afghanistan. But things got more complicated when our war of revenge spread over to Iraq, where we became responsible for years of destruction and chaos, and we are still in Afghanistan today, seeking a solution to what we have wrought. Revenge is bitter, not sweet, and only yields wild grapes, as in Isaiah’s song.

This parable Jesus told in Matthew has led many to think that those who didn’t take good care of God’s vineyard in Israel, their own leaders, deserved to be punished, and lose the vineyard. It’s the obvious next step for human justice. But the clue to Jesus’ meaning comes when he quoted Psalm 118: “*The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord’s doing, and it is amazing in our eyes!*” There were more stories and parables to come in Matthew’s gospel, about kings giving wedding banquets to which no one came except for the poor, where Jesus would describe the coming destruction of the Temple, and warnings of the end of the age. We will hear plenty of them next month, in November. But we know what all of these stories led to: Jesus betrayal and arrest by his enemies, and his trial and crucifixion by the Romans. God did not send Jesus to be the messenger of doom and destruction of God’s people. Jesus came to give his life for the sake of the people – for the whole world – even as we reject him, to be its Savior, and the foundation for our lives of faith and our salvation.

To a people and a world that seems in our eyes to deserve punishment and destruction for the evil we do to one another, God sends a Savior to offer us mercy, forgiveness, reconciliation and new life! This is the message of good news which Jesus came to bring, in his teaching about the Kingdom, made real by the giving of his life, by his suffering and death. It’s a new twist to a story that we thought we knew the ending to: justice for the doing of evil, death and destruction for the taking of lives. Instead we all receive grace; the price being paid by Jesus himself!

We who follow Jesus have been called to care for God’s vineyard – the earth and all its peoples. The tools of this care were taught by Jesus in the Sermon on the

Mount – in the Beatitudes – where those who suffer and mourn, and those who by faith seek justice, mercy, righteousness and peace in this world are blessed by God.

So we have our own vineyard here in America, which our nation's mythology says is a gift from God for us to tend. How have we done? If you look at our nation's history, even though millions came innocently, seeking to make new lives for their families in a new world across the oceans, the truth of the matter is that this vineyard, this land, was taken from its native inhabitants by us, the newcomers. Much of the building of cities, vineyards, farms and plantations was done by Africans forced into slavery. We have not taken care of the land, we have exploited it for profit and our own comfort. We have allowed some to profit greatly from the manufacture and sale of weapons of war – which we have sold across the world and allowed individuals in America to buy far too easily, even our own children, who suffer the most. In the many deaths by gun violence, and the suffering of too many from poverty, and the divisions we have by religion or race, we have begun to reap what we have sown for centuries. So if you read our history like a parable, like an outside observer, you might agree that we have been wicked tenants here in the “vineyard of America”, which we don't deserve to keep. From a “justice” point of view, we don't deserve the blessing of God.

But when we read the whole of scripture, instead of a God of vengeance and retribution for our sins, we find a God of mercy and grace, who offers us forgiveness and new life. We find this God very much present today, even in the midst of destruction and violence. We saw God present in the people who were moved to pull others out of the flood waters of the hurricane in Texas, in Florida, and in Puerto Rico. We saw God's mercy in the people, the police, the first responders, and the bystanders, who risked their lives in Las Vegas to protect others from one shooter's bullets from high above them - even strangers, who lay with their bodies over wounded people they didn't know, or carried them to safety. The most impoverished and forgotten of all the people in Puerto Rico, in villages where there is no electricity or water, have become the ones who have helped their neighbors survive, until power is restored. These courageous acts of kindness are proof of God's merciful presence today, even as God's mercy was shown in the person of Jesus, who was rejected, but died for us on a cross 2000 years ago. The one who was rejected, has become the cornerstone of mercy and faith for us all.

Two weeks ago I watch a film on Netflix with Kim and our adult children: *First They Killed My Father*. It is a film about the suffering Cambodian people went through under the Khmer Rouge after the Vietnam War, through the eyes of a five-year-old girl. It was very hard to watch, as human beings were killed for once having worked for the government, as children were beaten for eating food without permission, and families starved to death in front of each other. Buddhist monks were called “leeches on society” and received the harshest treatment, made to pull

plows like oxen, and many of them were rejected and killed. My wife had to leave the room – she lived through it, and didn't want to see it again.

But in the end, one image stuck in my mind. The little girl, two sisters and two brothers survived, to grow up in the United States. They went back to Cambodia as adults to visit their homeland, and seek out relatives who survived the killing. In the final scene, she and her siblings kneeled in prayer before one of the great temples of Angkor Wat, built centuries ago with great stones, to receive a blessing from the monks. One of those monks in saffron robes, who had once been rejected by the Khmer Rouge, blessed them by sprinkling fragrant water on them from a bouquet of flowers. A country which had been decimated by war, whose leaders had rejected faith, ridiculed and killed its monks, and tried to create a new society without faith, had come to the brink of self-destruction. But at the end of the chaos, evil is cast out, and hope is reborn in the children who survived, through caring for each other and a faithful spirit, symbolized by the monks who bless them.

It brings to mind the blessing of God from the gospel today, which one day we pray will come to pass in our own land, for us, as we seek peace in the midst of our own turmoil and division. One day evil will be banished, *“death will be no more and tears will be wiped away,”* scripture says, and Jesus will come again to bring God's reign of righteousness and peace. In the meantime, we care for one another, open our hearts and our doors to those who seek safety and sanctuary, and use our hands and our voices to help bring healing and justice to the suffering, as Jesus has taught us.

For *“the stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this is the Lord's doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes!”*