

Pentecost 18A (10/8/17)

Isaiah 5:1-7

Psalm 80:7-15

Philippians 3:4b-14

**Matthew 21:33-46**

*We all have a shadow side. It's easy to point a finger at the worst offenders, all the while concealing our own creeping proclivity for wickedness. But, we are all subject to the self-centeredness and violence that bring about the Son's murder, impulses that have fractured our life together in every generation since. Our death-dealing, however, cannot finally overwhelm the Creator's dream for our life together, a dream built on the very cornerstone we rejected.*

*When they heard his parables, they realized he was speaking about them.*

In the wake of a shocking tragedy like the killing in Las Vegas last Sunday night, our first instinct is to search for the cause. There must be some explanation for such an inhuman act. Was the killer radicalized by an extremist group? Was he mentally ill? Was he retaliating against a lover, a family member, a coworker? One of the more terrifying aspects of the most recent mass shooting is that authorities have yet to identify a motive. There was no predictable chain of events leading up to the massacre; neither did anyone who claimed to know the killer report any suspicion that he could do such a thing. So, we're left with the nagging question: *Why?*

I suppose it's a natural response. Nevertheless, some members of the victims' families insisted that the *why* doesn't particularly matter to them. Discovering a motive for the Las Vegas shooting might satisfy our desire to know the reason, but it would not mend the permanent rupture in their lives, the gaping wound left behind by the sudden, needless deaths of their loved ones. An answer to the question of *why* might allow the rest of us to make some sense of the event, however intolerable, but would remove none of the suffering of those directly impacted.

Neither would the discovery of a reason in the case of such a tragedy necessarily move us to self-reflection. On the contrary, an answer to the question of *why* allows us to subtly dissociate ourselves from the evil of the event. *If the killer is a murderous radical, well, at least I'm not. If the killer is out of his mind, well, at least I'm not. If the killer is lashing out at the world from a place of pain or loneliness, well... I would never go so far.* **With a satisfactory explanation, we can offer our thoughts and prayers from a safe distance without having to acknowledge that we are also entangled in the reality of a world where this kind of thing regularly occurs.**

But, what if there is no satisfactory explanation for the killing of dozens of concertgoers from the thirty-second floor of a hotel across the street? **What if the only sense we're able to make of it in the end is that humankind is beset by its own captivity to violence?**

The mass shooting in Las Vegas last Sunday made Jesus' parable in our Gospel from Matthew especially difficult to read on Monday. As if images of violence were not already pervasive enough, the parable of the Wicked Tenants is explicit in its portrayal of brutality:

There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a wine press in it, and built a watchtower. Then he leased it to tenants and went to another country. When the harvest time had come, he sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his produce. But the tenants seized his slaves and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. Again he sent other slaves, more than the first; and they treated them in the same way. Finally he sent his son to them, saying, "They will respect my son." But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, "This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance." So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him.

It borders on the absurd. Left to their own devices, the wicked tenants bludgeon and murder a series of the landowner's messengers without equivocation – entire groups of slaves at first, and finally the landowner's own son. Collectively, they are a flat character, a personification of greed and evil, like the arch villain in a hero saga. And this makes them an easy target: “Now when the owner of the vineyard comes,” Jesus asks his listeners, “what will he do to those tenants?” They take the bait: “He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the harvest time.”

*Those wretches. If they are heartless degenerates, well, at least we're not. If they beat and kill defenseless slaves, well, at least we wouldn't. If they are so self-involved that they would risk murdering the landlord's own son, well... we would never go so far.* The wicked tenants make the rest of us look like angels, don't they? So, Jesus' listeners respond in a predictable way. They dissociate themselves from the evil at the heart of the parable and render a quick judgment: *Those wretches deserve to die.* Of course, by judging the wicked tenants, they pronounce judgment on themselves.<sup>1</sup>

**If the wicked tenants indulge the urge to violence, then so do the ones who call for their deaths.**

*When they heard his parables, they realized he was speaking about them.*

The uncomfortable truth is that we all have a shadow side. We harbor hostility toward our favorite targets, we maneuver to secure our own interests while neglecting the interests of others, we revel in our own sense of entitlement, we celebrate violence as a means of justice and redemption. It's easy to point a

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<sup>1</sup> Susan Grove Eastman, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Vol. 4, 143.

finger at the worst offenders, all the while concealing our own creeping proclivity for wickedness. But, **we are all subject to the self-centeredness and violence that ultimately bring about the Son's murder, impulses that have fractured our life together in every generation since.** "Who was the guilty?" the second stanza of a beloved Good Friday hymn begins, "Who brought this upon thee? Alas, my treason, Jesus, hath undone thee. 'Twas I, Lord Jesus, I it was denied thee; I crucified thee."<sup>2</sup>

**When God sends us messengers to deliver a word of justice and mercy, we would rather destroy the messengers than allow the message to change us. Even God's own Beloved Son does not receive the welcome he deserves, but only our spite.** Nevertheless, our death-dealing cannot finally overwhelm the Creator's dream for our life together, a dream that liberates us from our destructive tendencies. **Death, as it turns out, is not the end of the Son, but a gateway to a new beginning. And, in resurrection, he also breathes new life into us, offering us his own peace – peace the world cannot give.**<sup>3</sup>

Dear church, that's the dream God has built on the very cornerstone we rejected, the dream of a world renewed, a vineyard where the tenants exchange our self-centeredness and hostility for self-giving love and mutual concern. And, according to the hope given to us in Christ crucified and risen, we might yet produce the fruits of the kingdom that has come near in him.

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<sup>2</sup> Johann Heermann, tr. Robert Bridges, "Ah, Holy Jesus," *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, #349.

<sup>3</sup> John 14:27; 20:19-23.