

In the Name of Jesus. Amen.

A lot has happened since we met here together last week. Just yesterday, the sun came out, the skies cleared up, and the temperature went up – enough to be able to open the windows a bit, and do just about anything outside! Glorious day which refreshed our spirits.

And this week, the Chicago Cubs who had made it into the playoffs a week and a half ago or so, started playing *in* those playoffs!

And, one image I personally can't shake is the video of a powerful person from the White House, whom many Puerto Ricans had come to hear, hoping for word of more serious relief finally on its way from the mainland, magnanimously, randomly throwing single rolls of paper towels to them from where he stood – to these people who have not only personally lost everything, but whose entire country was devastated, and is now badly crippled, by the torrential rains and floods and winds of the direct hit of a category 5 hurricane. Rolls of paper towels, and the words, "Good luck."

But perhaps the images, thoughts, fears we have the hardest time shaking is the sight and sounds of what amounts to a terrorist attack in Las Vegas just one week ago today – not by an Isis recruit, nor a neo-Nazi, but a middle-class white American male with a jerry-rigged automatic weapon, similar to those they hand out to soldiers on the front lines of war. The staggering number of additional weapons and ammunition found in his motel room, his car, and at his home leaves us incredulous – why would any one man need or even want *that much* seriously lethal, military-like firepower in his personal possession? This is waaaay beyond hunting, or protecting his home from a burglar.

But the creepiest and most frightening thing of all? Investigators have since found out a great deal about this fellow, but so far they have absolutely no clue as to why. *Why* did he shower this horrendous violence – 58 people *killed*, 500 or so wounded --upon a random gathering of people enjoying an outdoor concert?

Mind-boggling violence. More disturbingly -- inexplicable, seemingly random violence. But what is more alarming to me is that we are scandalized by these violent shootings and events at first, and there is a loud outcry initially, but they are becoming so frequent and in so many different venues, that after it's been in the news for a week or two, we seem to pretty much forget about it – until the next one. My greatest discomfort is that these things are seeming to be slowly becoming "normal" to us; we've almost come to expect them. Despite the initial outcry every time, virtually *nothing happens, nothing changes...* and so it is virtually guaranteed, there will be more coming.

Interestingly, our gospel reading for this 18th Sunday after Pentecost is violent, too. As you know, the Catholic and most Protestant church bodies preach

according to a 3-year Lectionary (readings) – from texts determined for each Sunday years in advance. The gospel readings, in particular, are chosen so that we get through the bulk of each of the first three gospels over the course of 3 years from Advent to Advent – Year 1 is Matthew (which we’re in now until Advent), then we’ll start Year 2 which is Mark, Year 3 is Luke -- with the gospel of John always read throughout the Easter seasons. These texts are not chosen week by week by individual preachers, based on current events or personal preferences. Instead, we follow this schedule of readings. So the “appointed” gospel text for Year A, the year of Matthew, on this, the 18th Sunday after Pentecost, is Matthew 21:33-46. Another term for this season of Pentecost (the longest season of the church year) is “Ordinary Time.” What does Scripture have to say to us beyond the holiday seasons of Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, and Easter? What does God/Jesus have to say on ordinary days?

And so today we have this reading of the Vineyard and the Wicked/violent tenants.

A landowner plants a vineyard – a first-class vineyard by the sound of it, with a protective fence around it, a wine press built right there on-site, and a watchtower. Then he leases this agricultural masterpiece to some farmers, entrusting it to them, and goes off to another country. After the harvest, he sends servants to collect the rent – standard operating procedure: give to the landlord not all of the first fruits, but just a share of the first fruits, and keep all the rest for yourself.

Suddenly, something goes terribly wrong. When the servants arrive, the farmers beat the first one who comes, kill the second one, and stone the third. They not only reject the messengers who came to tell them what they did not want to hear – “The rent is due” – They defy the master and owner of the vineyard by trying to keep for themselves what really belongs to him.

We’re not talking about a simple misunderstanding here, or some bit of reluctance, or even disagreement over the terms of the rental agreement. We are talking attempted theft, assault, and murder. What is the landowner going to do? How is he going to respond to this intense violence, and protect what is his?

How? He sends more messengers. *He sends more messengers?* Really? What kind of a fool is he to keep giving these dishonest farmers one chance after another? You’ve heard the definition of insanity: doing the exact same thing over and over, expecting to have a different result. What does he think the farmers are going to do? Suddenly have a change of heart – “Oops! Sorry about those other guys. We didn’t really mean it. Here’s the rent. Now let’s let by-gones be by-gones!”

Well, that’s not what they did. They did the exact same thing to the second wave of faithful messengers that they did to the first.

That should have certainly taught the owner and master a life lesson. We've heard it before: "Violence is the only thing they understand. Force is what they respect. So, force is what they will get. So...what are you going to do now, Master?"

"Hmm, I think I'll send my son to collect the rent this time. They'll respect him because he's my son."

I can see the heads shaking, especially his family's heads. "Are you out of your mind?" But the son obeys his father, and walks right into a group of men who have violently rejected every other messenger.

And what happens? The farmers scheme: "The son is the legal heir. If there is no heir, the land goes to those who have worked it. We'll get it all! Kill the son, and the land is ours!" So they seize the son, first disgracing him by dragging him out of the vineyard, and then kill him.

Here, at the height of the action, the parable abruptly ends. It ends with the master having no rent, no servants, and now, no son; and instead of telling us how the master reacted, Jesus leaves his listeners and us with the question: "Now, when the owner of the vineyard comes himself, what will he do to those farmers? The end."

We struggle with this parable because the world we live in is still a violent place much of the time. War, terrorism, mass shootings, cars being driven into crowds of people all have become so common, it is served up as the entrée on every TV and radio newscast and in every newspaper. We can sit comfortably in our easy chairs at home, and watch the carnage while we eat supper.

We struggle with this parable because we know the Master has entrusted the vineyard to us, and we have not cared for it very well. We humans have not revered and cared for God's creation, but over the centuries have been greedy, just like the farmers in the parable, and have plundered it to supply our every desire, no matter what the cost to earth, sky, water, creatures, and all living things.

When Jesus asks them "What will the Master do?", the Pharisees have no difficulty in answering: "He will put those wretches to a miserable death."

But remember. This story is only one of many in the larger story of Jesus. And where is Matthew's larger story taking us? It all leads to a consummate act of violence: Crucifixion. Of the innocent Son and heir. Just like in the parable.

But then all of a sudden it's *not* the same as the parable. Because rather than returning violence for violence, God/Jesus suffers from and takes into himself our violence on the cross, and responds with forgiveness even of his murderers and betrayers; God/Jesus responds with life, with resurrection, with triumph over death and hell, offering not retribution, but peace.

God does not shrink from the sacrifice on the cross. Jesus does not respond with vengeance; he does not kick anyone out of the kingdom of heaven. Instead, the resurrected Jesus, having taken on the worst that our violence can inflict,

returns from the dead having released everyone in hell, and instructs his disciples to take the good news of God's lavish, unrestrained love to the very ends of the earth, promising to be with them always.

Have you ever heard a parent, or perhaps felt yourself, that you'd rather take on your child's suffering yourself than watch your child suffer? Where does that sense of self-sacrifice come from? I believe that impulse is of God, and God's spirit who lives in us – because that's how God feels about us. While we yet sinners, Jesus died for the ungodly, Jesus died for you and me.

So you see, the gospel/good news means in part that violence does not, and will not, have the last word. The gospel/good news means that the only response to violence is *not* more violence; that tragedy and death and loss and hatred are, in the end, *no match* for God's love and life and forgiveness and peace. Jesus himself tells us this many different times:

- Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Don't let your hearts be troubled, and don't let them be afraid (John 14:27).
- Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. (Mt. 5:9).
- Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; don't claim to be wiser than you are. Don't repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. (Rom. 12:15-18).
- And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age. (Mt. 28:20).

And Jesus constantly says one more thing, doesn't he. He says, "Follow me." And when he has healed or forgiven someone, he says, "Go and do likewise." We have 4 gospels and the whole New Testament which puts flesh on those words. So, when you think about it, we really *do* know what to do in response to violent actions, violent and reckless speech, don't we? I want to recommend again, as I have before, that you pick one gospel – I would suggest Luke – and read it in its entirety. Not in one sitting; this isn't a race. In fact, reading it more slowly, more deliberately – perhaps over the course of a week or more -- is the better way. Discuss and pray about what you read with your spouse or close friend.

Perhaps in doing so, we will be more and more able, in our words and our actions, to reflect Jesus, the light of the world, the light which no darkness can overcome. Amen.