

A CHANGE OF HEART

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CLLC
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Pentecost 18
Matthew 21:33-46

Dear friends in Christ, grace to you, and peace, from God our Father, and His Son, our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

So, I was going to preach on the lesson from Philippians today. After about four weeks of preaching on the parables, I wanted a little change of pace, and Paul's words to the Philippian Church seemed like the perfect choice. **So, forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ.** I had that sermon half written before I let the church office know that I had changed my mind on the preaching text. Forgetting the past and focusing on the future - who doesn't need to hear that sermon?

But as I sat down to write on Monday, my computer kept pinging alerts from the mass shooting in Las Vegas. Thirty lives lost...thirty-seven...forty ...fifty. I realized that this must be the focus of the sermon on Sunday. And I thought I could still use the text from Philippians, but the sermon would not come together. So, at 5 o'clock yesterday afternoon, I scrapped what was becoming a really crummy sermon, and I went back to the parable that Jesus told, about the wicked servants. And in light of the horrific events in Las Vegas, this parable took on a whole new look for me.

In short, the parable describes tenants who decided to kill the landowner's slaves when they come for the rent. And then they kill a second group of slaves who come for the rent. And finally, when the landowner sends his own son, they even kill him, somehow believing that now the vineyard would be theirs.

First, I was reminded how much violence there is in the bible. Have you ever noticed that? Prophets were beheaded; adulterers were stoned to death, innocent children were slaughtered by a jealous Herod when he was looking for the baby Jesus. So much of it is senseless, and seems to have been committed by evil people who enjoy killing just for sport.

Isn't that what we saw in Las Vegas last weekend? From thirty stories above a concert venue, this man was firing into a fishbowl of innocent people; people he'd never met, people who did not deserve their fate. Maybe mental illness was a factor in this man's evil act, or maybe it was a case of revenge. I'm certainly not trying to justify his actions, but we may never know what moved him to do this. I don't suppose it matters anyway.

But the second thing I noticed in the parable is what Jesus asks the Pharisees at the end of it; “What do you think the landowner will do to those wicked tenants when he returns?” It was a trick question from Jesus; he already knew what they would say. The Pharisees tell Jesus, “The landowner will put those wretches to a miserable death.” Here is proof from the earliest of times, that violence begets violence. Violence doesn’t solve the problem, it just leads to more violence. We’ve seen it for years with Israel and Palestine, lobbing missiles back and forth, and neither side has been willing to say “Enough!” We see it among gangs in Chicago. One brother is killed, and that requires a response, and on and on it goes. This is how we apply justice in this sinful world of ours; you hit me hard, I’ll hit you harder. And we never break the cycle.

So the parable of the wicked servants is really a foreshadowing about our nation in the 21st century. But our nation has taken gun violence to new heights. In the United States, gun violence has become a relentless daily occurrence, and it has reached a point where people no longer need a motive to kill, nor do they need to know their intended target. It used to shock me, these killings, but not anymore. And perhaps that’s the saddest result of all; that as a nation, we’re horrified when 600 victims are taken down, but it no longer surprises us.

I was shocked in 1999, when two students roamed the halls of Columbine High School and killed a teacher and 12 of their classmates. That following Sunday, I preached a knee-jerk reaction sermon, and it caused one young man to storm out of worship while I was still speaking. I received his blistering letter on Tuesday, calling me to task, and I probably deserved it. And I promised myself that I would never again address the subject of guns in a sermon. And I haven’t, until today.

But this is not a sermon about guns; it’s a sermon about gun violence. It’s a sermon about hoping my grandchildren and yours can live in an America where they are unafraid to go to school, or to a parade, or to a ballgame. And I am banking on the hope that everyone in this place would do whatever is necessary to protect the future of children. Whether we are gun owners or not, the thing we do have in common is the desire for safety for those we love. We cannot watch over them 24 hours a day, and even if we were constantly with them, this does not insure their safety.

So it begs the question, “What CAN we do?” Because, if nothing changes, nothing changes. Are you okay with that; to allow the trend of violent injury and death to continue?

If not, then can we insist that those with a history of mental illness should not own a firearm, and that law would be strictly enforced? Can we all agree that an assault weapon

is nothing more than a machine-gun and is not used for deer hunting? Can we all agree that the NRA should return to its original purpose of teaching gun safety, and not lobbying congress? Can we call our members of congress, and our legislators and governor and demand that they at least do something!

We can do all of those things, and we should, but that's not where our hope lies. Pastor David Lose writes that, "the world has taught us that the only response to violence is more violence." I think that's true, but people of faith say that the better response to more violence is more love. We're not going to change our nation with more gun laws. That's too simplistic. We need to change the cycle of illiteracy, racism, poverty and hatred. And change does not happen overnight, but it happens over time, when we're caring for the root of the problem instead of addressing the symptoms only. Our hope lies not in government orders and threats of retribution. Our hope lies in our belief that God is still in control of this world. And that love wins. In the end, love always wins.

The most dramatic display of violence in human history was the day Jesus died on the cross. Bleeding and dying, he did not say, "Fight back! Kill those bastards!" Rather he told us to find a way to love them, find a way to forgive them, and pray for them. That's harder than demanding an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, and passing laws that don't work. Yet this is the hard work of the gospel, to heal our world with love. Thanks be to God. Amen.

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Matthew 21:33-46

³³“Listen to another parable. 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.³⁴When the harvest time had come, he sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his produce. ³⁵But the tenants seized his slaves and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. ³⁶Again he sent other slaves, more than the first; and they treated them in the same way. ³⁷Finally he sent his son to them, saying, ‘They will respect my son.’ ³⁸But when the tenants saw the son, they said to

themselves, ‘This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance.’”³⁹ So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him.

⁴⁰Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?”⁴¹ They said to him, “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.”⁴² Jesus said to them, “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’?”⁴³ Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom.⁴⁴ The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls.”⁴⁵ When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they realized that he was speaking about them.⁴⁶ They wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowds, because they regarded him as a prophet.