

Pentecost 18 (A) Proper 22. October 8, 2017. Matthew 21:33-46.

We have mass shootings in this country often enough that we are familiar with the pattern. We are shocked but not surprised by each one. We more or less know how the script is going to play out: where we can look for outrage, where we can expect silence, what themes various politicians and religious leaders will sound in their carefully prepared statements. We can intuit the stories of the heroism of the first responders and civilians thrust into unimaginable situations. We know the statistics that Republicans and Democrats will cite. We church workers know the best places to go to buy candles for our vigil services. What felt new to me this week, after fifty-nine children of God were murdered within a few minutes, was the despair. We all always grieve; we are all always outraged. But this time, it felt like despair. Like the certain knowledge that nothing would change, that the people who rule us are content for this to be a normal part of American life, and that most of us don't really have much control over who rules us and how.

I am deeply aware that part of my job is to try to make some faithful sense of all this, and to do so in conversation with the assigned readings for today. So we'll see how this goes. Today's parable isn't really one of Jesus' most famous ones. It's not one whose moral gets cross-stitched onto throw pillows. We might call it the parable of the really quite terrible tenants, or the parable of the remarkably naïve landlord. Matthew's intention is pretty clear, I think. The parable is about God's attempts to restore right relationship with people. God sends emissaries and they are mistreated. These might be the judges and lawgivers and kings of the Hebrew Bible. And when they get kicked out, God sends more folks and here we might think of the prophets. And then finally God sends God's son, Jesus, who as we know is also killed. According to the Pharisees themselves, these wicked tenants are meant to be them and people like them—the religious elite among the people bearing the brunt of God's relationship with the world.

There is of course a sting in the tail for Christian relationships with our Jewish cousins, as this text has been used—and may have been intended by Matthew to be used—to justify Christianity taking early Judaism's place as “God's favorite religion.” If that is the original meaning and intent of the parable, then comfort and inspiration in times of great grief isn't the first thing that comes to mind. But I think in fact this parable can have a bit to say to us now, in this particular moment of anguish. Because it, like our nation, has a cycle of violence at its heart. If it weren't so obviously a parable meant to make an allegorical religious point, we might find it easier to be horrified.

The landlord's people, just doing their jobs, are brutally murdered. And so he sends more people to address this injustice and they, too, are murdered. The tenants double down on violence and then reach the apogee of their wickedness with the absurd plan to murder the heir and then, obviously, inherit his money. Because that's how that usually works. Matthew is trying to make a point about people's response to God, but he almost inadvertently gives us a true picture of violence. It is a truism, but only because it is true, that violence begets more violence. And we see that here. The tenants start down a path of murderous violence and quickly find that there are no branches off the path to let them double back. The only way forward that they can see is to go deeper into violence.

And that is a second aspect of the violent life that this parable illustrates: it makes us stupid. We make a choice to kill once, and suddenly it seems like the only choice left.

And then the stupidity spreads: it's hard to think of a dumber scriptural idea than this plan openly to kill the heir and then hope to gain the inheritance. It may be intuitive that stupidity leads to violence—I would suggest that the reverse is also true: violence leads to stupidity.

If we see this parable as telling us something about violence, then we might also see it telling us something about the divine response to violence—which might be very much what we need to hear this week. First we need to sort out whether God is going to bring these wretches to a terrible death. I ask you to note that this is the crowd's idea, not Jesus' words. And although Jesus switches metaphors and hints at a messy end for those who reject him, the end of Matthew's gospel only offers the resurrection and repeated offers of salvation.

Repeated offers of salvation: this is how the landlord of the parable responds, too. The first ambassadors are killed. So he sends even more ambassadors. And when they, too, are killed he doesn't despair. He doesn't give up. He does something extraordinary by sending his son to try to break the one-sided cycle of violence. The wickedness of the tenants is no call for divine despair or even retribution—it calls for even more radical loving giving. God comes back again and again and again, confronting violence with love.

I don't think you need me to preach specific policies or legislation. We all know what policies would reduce these regular horrors. We need only copy any other rich, stable democracy in the world. But we may all need to hear this week that God and God's people do not despair. Though we may be killed, we keep showing up because that is what our Lord Jesus did and does. We keep showing up and calling the murderers and those complicit in their violence to justice. And when we are unsuccessful and they kill again, we give even more. Because we are giving from the inexhaustible love of God that created us, sustains us, and will bring this broken world to redemption. Amen.