

October 8, 2017

Math. 21: 33-

It is always a challenge to give a sermon, but after an event like the one in Las Vegas last week it is so much more difficult. Not necessarily because I can't come up with words of comfort and hope, but, by now there have been so many words of comfort and hope expressed by so many people that they all start sounding alike. And besides that, there really are no words of comfort and hope that many of the people who have experienced loss in this last mass shooting in Las Vegas will be able to hear.

That said, I am the person called to this task, and I will try to give a perspective on how we move on, how we persevere and what we may need to take a look at in order to do so.

When I was a young girl, we went to church every Sunday. I am a cradle Episcopalian, but beyond that, I come from a family that worshipped regularly; except for summer. During the summer, we did not attend church regularly. As an adult, I have found that I have missed out on some of the most important and fundamental teachings of Jesus. For without our summer readings, almost all of the parables of Jesus are left unheard. And it is through the parables that we are led to understand what Jesus means when he talks about the Kingdom of Heaven. Just think back on our summer gospels about how many of them begin with the words, "The Kingdom of Heaven is like..." Through these parables we are continually shown a contrast between how the world we live in differs from God's vision for us in the Kingdom of Heaven. The other problem in missing out summer worship is to see how Jesus' message becomes more strident and his parables become more pointed as approaches Jerusalem. The religious authority is becoming more and more anxious about his preaching, and they are turning up more and more often to respond to his parables.

What is the nature of a parable and why did Jesus use them so often. The use of parable is a very ancient way of teaching. We see parables interwoven throughout the stories of the Hebrew Bible. They were most often used by the prophets to promote change. The parable teller would engage the listener into thinking the

story was about someone else and in the surprise ending, they would find out that they were the main character.

Today's Gospel does just that. Once again we have a vineyard, this time with an absentee landlord. Vineyards are lovely, pastoral settings, but managing a vineyard is like any other kind of farming. It is not only hard work, but the vinemaster is also prey to the whims of weather, insect infestations, and wildlife forages. Vinemasters in Jesus' day, working in the field might feel that they were being neglected and underpaid, and while it isn't stated in the story, that may well have been the case here. When the landlord sent servants to collect, instead of coming himself, the workers may have felt that they had no one to hear their concerns about pay, work or planning. The ridiculous idea that if they killed the landlord's son that they would inherit the fields seems farfetched, wishful thinking. But it might give us an insight into the frustration level of the workers. All of that may have been the case. The gist of the story is when Jesus turns to the crowd and asks "Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?" They answered, "he will put those wretches to a miserable death..."

if looked at allegorically, as Jesus as the son who was killed, the people as the tenants and God as the owner of the vineyard, I struggle with the story without considering Jesus' next statement. 'Have you never read in the scriptures: "The stone which the builders rejected has become the main corner-stone."' I believe that the point of the vineyard story is to acknowledge the way of the world. The way of the world is a tit for tat culture; quid pro quo; you scratch my back, I'll scratch yours. Jesus is telling those who will listen that this is NOT what the Kingdom of Heaven is like. The vineyard owner in the Kingdom of Heaven is not a vengeful God who exacts payment for wrongdoing. The world of the parable is when someone does you wrong you get even. But the Kingdom of Heaven operates on a very different basis – on the basis of God's love – God's grace and God's unfailing mercy. The specter of a vengeful God does not even exist in the Kingdom of Heaven.

In the new kingdom that Jesus proclaims, enemies become friends. In the Kingdom of Heaven, those who rebel may indeed find themselves broken and crushed by their defiance, but they also find that God is the one who heals the broken and lifts up those who are crushed. In this new Kingdom, there is no more “eye for an eye” because the operative language has been changed to “forgive as you have been forgiven”, be merciful as you have been shown mercy. “Love your neighbor as yourself.”

And where does that leave us today. We want answers to our questions of why someone would harm innocent people. We want this person who perpetrated these horrific crimes to be “other than us”; and we want that so that our fears can be allayed and we can close our eyes at night feeling a sense of security. And when our fears can't be allayed, we are faced with the realization that we live in an extremely dangerous and unpredictable world. But perhaps the closer we come to realizing that our world isn't a whole lot safer or secure than the world of the parables the closer we come to seeing the radical message of Jesus. Jesus asks us to have faith; to not be afraid; and to never lose hope. Jesus asks us in the face of the real evil that we have seen to continue to love one another. Faith, hope and love; those are the foundational elements upon which the Kingdom of Heaven rests. And as Christians, we have a responsibility to show the world that we can turn these three words into action words in our lives.

I do not believe that there is a shortage of love in our world. When I saw the pictures of the people responding to the tragedy in Las Vegas, I saw an enormous outpouring of love. From first responders to people who waited in line from dawn to give blood, I clearly saw love and compassion. However, for me I would say that faith and hope are struggling.

If we are to be known as people of the faith, it is important to examine where our faith lies. We are not children who have blind faith in those who control our lives. In fact, many of us have lost faith in the institutions of our childhood. We no longer trust the government, law enforcement, or the media. And through this loss of faith in long-standing institutions, it is hard to know what to trust. But we are called to have faith. Faith is defined as a belief in or devotion to somebody or

something especially without logical proof. But as Jeff said in our forum last week we are called to the belief of Jesus rather than to believe in Jesus. The parables clearly show us what Jesus believed. Forgiveness, mercy, selflessness, compassion, empathy; these are all illuminated in these stories. I have experienced an earthquake. And I can tell you that in the hours after the ground beneath my feet has shaken, it is hard to feel secure anywhere. Like an earthquake, our world is shaken every time we are faced with unspeakable horror. However, the ground will eventually stopped shaking, In a sense, that is what hope and faith are; the ability to stand up, regain our footing and ~~keep on~~ keepin' on. *with God*

*walk
press on*