

Proper 22, Year A

October 8, 2017

Matthew 21:33-43

Jesus said, "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. 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. Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?" 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." 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'? 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."

Jesus tells another parable to the chief priests and elders of the people. A landowner has a vision of planting a vineyard that will yield the richest grapes, which will in turn produce the finest wine. He plants his vineyard, and does everything he can in order that the vineyard will produce abundantly. Then he entrusts it into the hands of stewards to care for, and leaves for another country.

When the time comes for the harvest, the landowner sends servants to collect his produce. But his servants are beaten, stoned, and killed by the stewards of the vineyard—not once, but twice. In his frustration, the landowner sends his own son, thinking that surely the stewards will respect *him*. But the stewards, having their **own** dreams of *keeping* the vineyard for *themselves*, **kill** his son.

Jesus intimates to the chief priests and elders that **THEY** are the unfaithful stewards and the vineyard is the people of Israel whose care and flourishing is **their** responsibility. Jesus drives home the point of the parable, telling the chief priests and elders: "... the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom."

My friends, down through the centuries, God has *continued* to entrust his vineyard, his Kingdom, this world he has created in all its abundance and potential, to stewards like you and me, that **we** might bring forth the abundant fruits of his kingdom, for God's sake.

But it seems that we share some of the same characteristics of those first stewards in Jesus' parable. For we often live our lives as though God has gone to another

country. We do not *see* God, so he is often “out of sight, out of mind.” And we begin to think that this vineyard, God’s world and all its creatures, belongs to *us*; and we take actions to secure it for our own possession. Not “**Thy** kingdom come, **thy** will be done” but rather “**My** kingdom come, **my** will be done.” We can even convince ourselves that we are in the right, all the while we are laying waste to God’s vineyard, God’s kingdom, God’s people, God’s world. We **forget** that we are the *stewards*, not the *owners*, of life, creation, and the time, talent, treasure, and spirit God gives us. The truth is, my life is not about *me*; your life is not about *you*! Some day we will **all** have to surrender our lives back to God and be returned to the earth from which we came, “earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust,” as our burial service says. We are but stewards of our own lives, for however long a time we have on this earth. The poet and mystic William Blake said, “we are put on earth a little space, that we may learn to bear the beams of love.” And I think that bearing the light-beams of God’s love is what it means to faithfully tend God’s vineyard as God’s stewards during the short span of our life on this planet.

One week ago today, Stephen Paddock opened fire on a crowd of people attending a concert in Las Vegas, and when it was all over, there were 59 people dead, and over 500 wounded – people who had come from as far away as Massachusetts and the provinces of Canada. Mothers and fathers, sons and daughters, grandparents and grandchildren - each a beloved child of God, bearing the image of God. Each could well have been you or me or someone we love.

A TIME Magazine reporter interviewed one of the survivors, 29-year-old Doris Huser, who was at the concert with her 8-year old daughter Cordelia, her 5-year-old son Aden, and her 25-year-old developmentally disabled sister, Samantha.¹ At one point in the concert, her daughter needed to go to the bathroom, so Mrs. Huser left her sister and son for a moment while she took Cordelia to a port-a-potty just outside the concert venue fence. It was as they were returning that the shooting started, and in the panic that ensued, Doris Huser could not find her sister or 5-year-old son. “People say that in a war, you get an instinct to stay down, to get cover, but I didn’t have that instinct,” Doris told the reporter. “All I had was, ‘I have to find my son. I have to find my sister.’” While others were fleeing the shooting, Doris held Cordelia’s hand tightly and pushed *against* the fleeing crowds toward the place where she had left Aden and Samantha. There were bodies everywhere. Some had been shot, some were bleeding. Others were lying on top of each other. There were piles of people strewn all over. Doris and Cordelia moved from pile to pile, looking for a shoe or a shirt they recognized. All the while, bullets hit the pavement all around them.

A man, seeing that Doris was in grave danger, came up and grabbed Cordelia, threw her over his shoulder, and grabbed Doris by the belt, pulling her away from the gunfire and yelling, “Run! Run for your life!” He got Doris and Cordelia to safety. And it was then that Doris lost it, and started screaming. Law enforcement officers would not allow her to return to the concert venue to look

for her son and sister. Her cell phone was dead. The next several hours played out in a slow-motion nightmare. There was nothing she could do. She had no idea whether her son was alive or dead. Cordelia vomited for more than hour, her tiny body convulsing with fear.

After hours of panic and dread, Doris was told that Aden had been found and taken to a local hospital. Samantha had been found and taken to local restaurant. Both were safe. The next morning, Doris awoke with an overwhelming sense of gratitude – gratitude that, by some miracle, she, her children, and her sister were alive. She had a profound sense that life is precious, and life is fragile.

Both Cordelia and Aden have experienced significant trauma. Doris has told them, “We’ve been through a war. Now is the time we have to be here for each other.” For Cordelia, the problem is loud noises. If anything claps or pops, she bursts into tears. When she goes to sleep, she sees images of death and blood, she feels the terror in her dreams. For Aden, it’s the dreadful fear of being left alone.

This is but one story of one family among the 22,000 people who attended that concert in Las Vegas. Similar accounts have been recounted by other survivors. In almost *every* account that survivors tell, they describe the overwhelming sense of the preciousness of life and the enormous gratitude they have for simply being able to breathe in and breathe out, to be alive.

Yes, we must *unflinchingly* face the very real issue of gun control; but not as one more politically polarized fight. For I think we can all agree that in the end it’s about real, human lives like Samantha and Doris and Cordelia and Aden, and the gift of being able to live and breathe and love on the face of this earth, God’s vineyard, being faithful stewards of whatever time, talents, treasure, and spirit God has given us to bring forth the fruit of **God’s** kingdom, **not** *ours*. Your life is not about you; my life is not about me. We are about loving God, loving our neighbor, and changing the world into the likeness of God’s kingdom through the power of God’s spirit working within us, through us, and among us.

We Christians believe that God took human flesh in the form of Jesus, who gave us the tremendous gifts of his teachings, his example, and his sacrificial love. But we must **use** those precious gifts and be good stewards of them, put them into practice in our lives, or else we are Christians in name only. We are imposters.

Next Sunday, we will each have the opportunity to pledge a portion of the time, talent, and treasure God has given us to do God’s work through this community of faith, this parish family, this part of Christ’s body we call Christ Church. And I do believe that God **is** at work in, among, and through this church! But just as human life is at the same time precious and fragile, so it is with the Christian Church at this time and place in our history. We can no longer assume that the local congregation will always be there whether or not we support it with our time, talents, treasure, and spirit. The impending closing of the Presbyterian

Church here in Canon City is a clear example, and across the Episcopal Church in America between the years 2010 and 2014, we have lost an average of 48 churches each year. The Episcopal church in La Veta, in our own region, closed just 3 months ago. And other denominations are in the same boat.

My friends, there is no more important work than to be faithful stewards of the time, talent, treasure and spirit God has given us, individually and as a community of faith, Christ Church, to bring forth his Kingdom in this world. As last Sunday in Las Vegas showed us, life is fragile, life is precious, life is a gift which God has given us for a short while to live out on this earth, then to return to him. In this week to come, we have the opportunity to reflect on the preciousness of God's gift of our lives, both individually and as a church family, and to prayerfully discern how we will pledge our time, talent, treasure, and spirit to bring God the fruit of his vineyard, that God's kingdom may come on earth as it is in heaven.

AMEN

¹ Much of the account of Doris' experience is taken directly from this article:
<http://time.com/4968333/las-vegas-shooting-victim/>