

Pentecost 18A. October 8, 2017. Dungeness Valley Lutheran Church, Sequim, WA. Isaiah 5:1-7. Psalm 80:7-15. Philippians 3:4b-14, Matthew 21:33-46

Psalm 80: Restore us, O God of hosts; let your face shine, that we may be saved. 8 You brought a vine out of Egypt; you drove out the nations and planted it. 9 You cleared the ground for it; it took deep root and filled the land. 10 The mountains were covered with its shade, the mighty cedars with its branches; 11 it sent out its branches to the sea, and its shoots to the River. 12 Why then have you broken down its walls, so that all who pass along the way pluck its fruit? 13 The boar from the forest ravages it, and all that move in the field feed on it. 14 Turn again, O God of hosts; look down from heaven, and see; have regard for this vine, 15 the stock that your right hand planted.

Matthew 21: "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. 34 When the harvest time had come, he sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his produce. 35 But the tenants seized his slaves and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. 36 Again he sent other slaves, more than the first; and they treated them in the same way. 37 Finally he sent his son to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.' 38 But 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. 40 Now 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.

It's been a terrible week....you could even say, it's been one hell of a week. Violence, sadness, fear, storm, fire, drought, Las Vegas. Continued killing, accidents, suicides, abuse. This week, with the backdrop of the Las Vegas shooting, I spoke with a man who is afraid of dying, with a woman who fears losing her sister, and with the friend of a young man who took his own life. Violence begets violence.

In our first reading, Isaiah declares that God expects justice but sees bloodshed; God cries for righteousness, but hears only crying.

In our Wednesday evening class we looked at the dark side. In the Thursday Bible class we prayed for people with new diagnoses, vision loss, cancer and for the parents and caregivers of these people.

Yes, there are plenty of tears. I know of at least one of our sister ELCA churches holding a “service of lament” this morning. In the words of the psalmist, the wild boar ravages the vineyard.

Enough already! Enough already?

So you needn’t ask why we added the Kyrie to our worship today. Lord, have mercy....on us as individuals, as community, as world. “pour out your grace and make us whole” we prayed.

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People continue to speculate on the motive of the shooter in Las Vegas. One commentator remarked, “He had no apparent religion that would have motivated this killing” – as though religion motivates killing. All I can sadly add to that remark is that he had no apparent religion that would prevent him from killing.

In my email queue this week I received a piece about the abject loneliness that affects many people in our society. Few people know their neighbors. Many have no meaningful work – paid or volunteer – and spend their days playing computer games or watching TV. The Las Vegas shooter apparently spent much of the last 25 years in front of video poker game screens. Some of us work in cubicles, keep our heads down, and just try to do our jobs. Return to homes where dinner is not shared, conversation not attempted, and constant barrage of ads and sensational news stories or reality shows erode our communal morality. Or we return to homes where our partner cannot share our feelings.

If this isn’t hell, I don’t know what is. We have often defined hell as “separation from God” – that’s what we’re seeing across our society today.

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We saw such erosion of morality in Jesus’ story today in the Gospel. The owner of the vineyard simply wants the rent due him from the tenants. Not only do the tenants refuse to pay the rent, but they kill the rent collectors – two sets of them. Do these tenants represent those in this world who not only do not take care of the vineyard – God’s garden, created to be good, not destroyed – but also refuse to thank the vineyard owner and respect his representatives? We have enormous wealth at the top of our worldly power structures and enormous poverty at the bottom. That was not God’s plan for justice and righteousness.

So, asks Jesus, what should the vineyard owner do? “Put those wretches to a miserable death,” answer the Pharisees. That’s what THEY would do. Shoot the Romans. Take back their own land. Run things their way.

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But that’s NOT what the vineyard owner does.

The vineyard owner is so eager to have a good relationship with the tenants that he sends his SON to try again to engage them.

God – the author of life – whose ways and being we can barely fathom – who desires justice and righteousness for the sake of the community and for each person in it – this God came

among us as Jesus, the Son in the story. On the cross, justice was exchanged for bloodshed. Righteousness was crucified with a loud cry of anguish, the anguish of God weeping over the sins, sorrows, and brokenness of humanity, over you and me.

Rather than return violence for violence, in the cross of Jesus, God absorbs our violence and responds with life, with resurrection, with Jesus triumphant over death and offering, not retribution, but peace.

The Holy Spirit holds us in a meaningful, life-giving relationship with God and with one another. Jesus' goodness and justice are given and our unfaithfulness and injustice are forgiven.

Jesus uses the biblical image of a cornerstone or capstone to describe himself. It sounds pretty harsh. The stone becomes deadly to those who reject it: crushing, breaking. This represents the experience of people when they look around and find their life has little or no meaning. They feel crushed, broken. Our Lord suggests that the religious leaders of his or our day may very well stumble and fall on God's truth, God's revelation in Jesus. The opposite, however, is that the rejected stone, Jesus, the son sent to the vineyard to reestablish relationship with the tenants – that stone becomes the most important piece of the whole vineyard, the most important piece of a building, and of a meaningful life. We stumble and fall, and Jesus bends down to pick us up. And he does it again and again and again.

He sometimes comes in the form of extra strength we didn't know we had. Christ sometimes comes in a new way of thinking that lifts us up off the ground. And Christ sometimes comes through other people who give us a hand, who give us an arm to hold on to or a shoulder to lean on, and who sometimes literally pick us up and carry us where we need to go. We revere the cornerstone because without it as center of our lives, we have no life.

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The Christian life is not defined by what we do. But, what we come to do when directed by the Holy Spirit IS good. Good things follow good faith. You show that in your life together.

Don't get me wrong. Christians are not by any means the only ones whose lives work for justice and show righteousness. We are privileged to live among many of God's people – of many religions or of no obvious religion – who seek to make God's vineyard just and good. We have seen many courageous and gracious acts of love following the hurricanes, the fires, the shootings; many good things are accomplished here in Sequim.

But this DVLC community is the vineyard I know best. You are generous, you care, you work hard for yourselves and others. Just yesterday you managed to raise \$2,800 for those suffering damage and pain from recent hurricanes. Last Saturday at the concert, you raised over \$1,100 for our local food bank, not counting all the food that was donated. This week one of our Stephen Ministers – on vacation a couple time zones away – was able to reach out to comfort one of you whose life seemed disastrous at the moment. This week there were gatherings every day in this place – gatherings of people for various reasons: to exercise, to learn, to plan, to worship, to sing, to pray, to clean, to create art, to uplift one another, to cook and bake, even, believe it or not, to have fun. And this kind of community is the surest cure for loneliness.

There is a place for everyone here. This community can help give meaning to lives that might seem or feel empty.

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Catherine of Siena, who lived in the 1300s and was known as a peacemaker, put these words into her dialogue between God and the world: "Keep in mind that each of you has your own vineyard. But everyone is joined to your neighbors' vineyards without any dividing lines. They are so joined together, in fact, that you cannot do good or evil for yourself without doing the same for your neighbors." (from "The Dialogue" in Saint Catherine of Siena)

In the psalm today, read at the beginning of worship, we prayed, "look down from heaven, and see; have regard for this vine!" And God does look down. God reaches us in the form of one another's comfort and care. God reaches us in a tiny sip of wine from God's righteous vineyard, the wine of his holy supper prepared for the millions of souls on millions of Sundays who reach out their hands to receive. Together, as a community of forgiveness, faith and hope, we dare to trust God above all else and to give up our worries and fears. That's why we keep coming back each week.

Violence begets violence. But violence does not and will not have the last word. Tragedy and death and loss and hatred are, in the end, no match for love and life and forgiveness and peace. Peace begets peace. Through Christ Jesus, we are people of peace.

May the peace of God which passes all human understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.