

Pentecost 18A + October 7, 2017
Matthew 21:33-46
Atonement Lutheran Church, Beloit, WI
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If there was ever a time we needed the church, it is now. Think of what we have been through: Over the span of only a few weeks we have had Harvey, Irma, Maria, and now Nate. Death, destruction, and despair. Someone said about Puerto Rico, "People are unable to go to work, they cannot produce, they do not know when they can return to work. There's widespread despair." Now we have this, last Sunday evening. What do we do with it? Is there the possibility that these kinds of things can almost become routine? Here's a stunning sentence from a Washington Post columnist written on October 2:

It's part of the American experience: We deal with mosquitoes in August, airport delays around Thanksgiving, expensive health care, and the potential of being shot, at any time, by a semiautomatic weapon as we try to go about the most boring, precious, asinine aspects of our daily lives.

In the wake of Las Vegas, there seems to be general agreement that "thoughts and prayers" are not enough. Here is Mark Kelley, husband of Gabby Giffords: "We have heard enough about thoughts and prayers, what we need now are plans." But what plans? Minor tweaks to existing laws won't really help. The truth is, you can't legislate away evil. No law will keep people from doing terrible things to other people, if that is what they are really determined to do.

Why do we need the church more than ever? Because especially in times like these, it helps us see who God is, who we are, and what is our plan of action.

The parable of the landowner and his rented vineyard is perfect for this Sunday. It's often used to talk about stewardship, the good care of that which God entrusts to us. But I think this story is just as much about loss, about surprising and devastating loss, and what is the response of faith.

Put yourself in the shoes of the central character, a landowner. He has been leading a comfortable but dull life. One day he has a dream. A dream of owning his own vineyard. A dream of planting the vineyard, a dream of grapes forming in lush clusters on the vines, a dream of morning dew sparkling on ripe fruit. A dream of rich wine, barrels and barrels of it. A dream of a whole new life for him and his family.

The landowner invests everything he has into his dream. He lovingly lays out his plans. First, he locates the perfect plot of land. Before the cold weather comes, he prepares the plot. He tills the earth and revels in the scent of the mineral-rich soil. He decides on how the vines will be spaced. He creates an irrigation system, puts up trellises, builds a fence around the plot, installs a wine press, and erects a watch tower. Then he acquires choice vines. One by one he lovingly plants them, pouring his dearest hopes into each hole as he fills in the soil. He steps back to survey his work. His heart is alive with hope. Finally, entrusts the vineyard to tenants who will care for it and pick the fruit.

At long last, harvest time arrives. Bursting with anticipation, the landowner sends out his servants to collect the bountiful harvest. Then comes the shock: The tenants attack his servants, killing one and severely injuring the other two. Confused, the landowner sends out more servants in another effort to collect the harvest. The same thing happens to them. How can this be?

Deeply disturbed, the landowner then decides to send his son to collect the grapes. Surely, the landowner thinks, they will receive my son, just as they would receive me. But then comes the unimaginable: His son, too, is ruthlessly killed by the wicked tenants. The landowner is beside himself with grief. His family has been shattered. His son, his heir, has been taken from him for what seems like no apparent reason, in a way he could never have imagined or expected. What is it like to be this father, in the midst of such an ocean of loss?

Now imagine that you are the parent of someone who was killed in the in the Las Vegas shooting. Someone whose path in life you lovingly laid out, and to whom you carefully tended, step by step, year after year. Someone who gradually came into their own, and whose life began to bear fruit. Someone who very being enriched the lives of others. Someone who made your dreams come true. This person is then taken from you in an instant, for no apparent reason, in a way you could never have imagined or expected. What is it like to be a grieving parent in the midst of this? In the parable we learn that the wicked tenants killed because they were hoping to take over the vineyard. In the case of Las Vegas there is no purpose to be known or understanding to be had. We find ourselves abandoned in the midst of our ocean of grief.

We have to feel that, really feel it, before we see the way out. For it is there in those dark waters that the cross floats before our eyes. The cross, where we find what we would least expect—God, condemned by his own people and crucified like a common criminal. The cross, where we see who God really is—the one who suffers with us and for us. The cross, where we see who we really are—afflicted, alone, despised and rejected by our own people. The cross, where divine power intersects with human weakness. The cross, means of the greatest outpouring of God’s love on earth, where we hear the words “for you, for you—given for you.”

Why do we need the church more now than ever? Because it is how we find out not only who God is and who we are, but also what we are called to do. The church gives us the plan we need, moving us beyond thoughts and prayers to action. The plan consists of just one word: *love*. We are called not just to preach love but to *be* love. We are called not just to offer thoughts and prayers, but to give our bodies, our resources, and our lives for the sake of others. We are called to receive the wild, radical, unconditional love of Jesus, and then to give it to others wherever they are, whether in houses of comfort, oceans of loss, or deserts of abandonment.

Only the church, with Christ as the cornerstone, can change the world. We can't legislate away evil, but we can get the better of it with by harnessing the most powerful force in the universe: Love.

Our work as disciples begins with worship, where we hear of and experience the promise of God's infinite, unconditional love. We find that God is wildly in love with each of us, and that nothing we do can hinder the outpouring of this love. This frees us to come out from behind barriers of doubt and deception. If God loves us just as we are, why would we need to pretend we are anything else? We can live fully just as unique, gifted persons God created us to be. As we live out this promise of God's love, so those whose lives intersect with ours are pulled toward God. Those who inhabit dark caves of despair begin to see a way out. This is why the church exists. We need it now more than ever. The church has got to find a way to stay alive and thrive, because without it the devil has a much better chance of getting his way. May God strengthen us all for service.

Amen.