

October 8, 2017 18th Sunday after Pentecost

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Isaiah 5:1-7, Psalm 80:7-15

Philippians 3:4b-14, Matthew 21:33-46

(with reference to reflections by David Lose from a previous time (perhaps 2014 or 2011),
and reference to DavidLose.net post for this Sunday)

Grace and peace, courage and hope to you, beloved of God, courage and hope.

Did you hear the gospel this morning? Were you listening? Really listening?

This gospel parable comes in a string of readings from Matthew.

Each Sunday the preacher finishes reading and says, “The Gospel of our Lord.”

To which we ever-so-dutifully respond, “Praise to you, O Christ.”

Now, really, work with me here, did this gospel this morning sound like good news?

Is this really the kind of promise to which we want to let out a big, bold “Yes! Preach it, sister!”?

Or even a more reserved, “Praise to you, O Christ.” or, “Thanks be to God”?

I’m not so sure.

It’s a challenging Gospel, in a season of challenging Gospels, in a week of painful, vivid,
unexplainable, horror: I’m thinking of Las Vegas, and you may have other suffering on your mind.

Do we inadvertently, perhaps a little too readily, add our praise, when **pause** might be called for?

It’s *this* Gospel and the other readings that I’ve been stewing about this week in light of what is going on
around us: the pain so close, and the deep yearning for hope, for courage, for another way.

Let’s look first at the parable for today.

This parable is a bit of a gotcha, aimed directly at the Chief Priests and the Pharisees.

Don’t forget where today’s parable lands in Matthew’s telling of the Jesus story:

At the beginning of this chapter, chapter 21 in Matthew, Jesus has ridden into Jerusalem on a donkey.

They cut the palm branches. The people lined the road and called out Hosanna. Sound familiar?

Today’s parable follows on the heels of the first Palm Sunday, the start of Holy Week,

and that places today’s parable at about Monday of Holy Week.

Not only that, but in Matthew, between entering Jerusalem and telling this little string of challenging
parables, Jesus went to the temple and turned over the tables and the stools of the money changers.

He sent Greek and Roman and Jewish coins flying, skittering every which way.

The leaders of the temple, the chief priests, the scribes, the elders must have been feeling the tension:

How to stop this Jesus-fellow? What authority does he *think* he has?

In turn, directed right to these religious leaders, Jesus offers harsh, pointed parables, his own gotcha.

“There is this man who owns a vineyard,” Jesus tells them, he planted and fenced and dug and built and finally leased it to some tenants.

His tenants run the vineyard and he sends slaves to collect the rent, and they are met with violence.

Then he tries again, sending more slaves, and they get more violence.

Then he tries a third time, this time sending his son, his heir, and still more violence, greed, and death.

Violence and violence and more violence.

Jesus explains this parable with a question, something like, “When the owner returns, what will he do with the tenants?”

In the gospel of Mark and the gospel of Luke, it’s a rhetorical question and Jesus supplies the answer.

But when Matthew tells the story, Jesus does the asking and the Pharisees do the answering.

The response is particularly violent, especially harsh: “He’ll put those wretches to a miserable death.”

Violence, it seems, begets violence.

Don’t forget that Matthew was writing to a Jewish Christian community.

Isn’t it interesting that throughout this Gospel, the Jewish religious leaders, the chief priests, the Pharisees, the elders are treated especially harshly.

In Matthew’s time, this little community of Jesus followers was rag tag, fledgling, an underdog movement, and that big gotcha to the religious leaders was a way of giving it back to the establishment, if you will.

Historians suggest that the stress on this minority community was immense in those years.

Some of these followers of Jesus’ way may have been considering returning to the tradition of their childhood: so then with Matthew’s lens, Jesus saw the Pharisees and leaders as competition, a threat to their loyalty, their faithfulness.

Perhaps that is why the language Matthew uses is so very harsh, so very violent.

Trouble is, as David Lose writes, this little fledgling community wasn’t fledgling for long.

Very quickly it (we) grew up and gained power, and aligned with the empire’s powers, and now this reading just looks like awkward self-vindication over and over and over again.

Scripture like this is still too often held against the Jewish community, against our own Jewish kin and neighbors, the fuel for yet more anti-semitic violence.

Violence begets violence, or so it seems.

One shooting leads to another and all week long the growing violence has been chronicled and profiled.

How do we respond? Where do we go from here?

I am not convinced that this Gospel reading in itself is the Good News we need or yearn for today, and yet I want us to understand the context, lest we let our own tradition inflict yet more violence.

I am convinced that when we read on in Matthew's gospel (or any of the Gospels) to the end of Holy Week, to yet more violence, the crucifixion... everything changes.

Jesus is killed in a violent death, but he rises in love.

He rises and meets first the women, "Don't be afraid," he tells them.

He rises and sends them out with the promises of grace and mercy, and the power to Spirit.

He rises so that violence then, and violence now, doesn't get the final word.

That means that violence doesn't have to birth more violence—we can change that cycle.

"That," as David Lose writes this week, "that tragedy and death and loss and hatred are, in the end, no match for love and life and forgiveness and peace."

That's the gospel promise that I pray you carry home today and that you take with you into this coming week: violence isn't the final word. Can I get an Amen?

Let me name just a few images and reflections that I'm carrying this week.

These are relatively fresh, and yet I offer them in trust, in hope:

First, I'm thinking about how important it is to look one another in the eye.

Steven Paddock carried out his terror from a distance, never seeing the faces, the eyes of those he killed.

While it's tempting at times like this to disconnect, our chance at changing the cycles includes some basic things, like eye contact.

Second, maybe the next step after (or perhaps before) eye contact is to let ourselves be broken open.

All week long, many of you have popped by church, sighing, eyes weary, struggling to comprehend what happened on Sunday night, but really what is happening often, all around us.

Letting ourselves be broken open, pained in our souls and our psyches, in our bodies, for what is happening, leads us another step closer to the gospel's call, and to real change.

Gun control or better mental health care or deeper racial justice transformation, I need to feel it if I'm going to work to be part of the change.

It must matter to me, and touch me, it must be part of my calling, my vocation.

Thirdly, it's not about just me, or just you, but it's about our communal calling, our communal vocation.

In that sense, as communities, as a people, **we** need to be broken open, recognizing the pain,

listening closely to the Spirit's call and to voices that differ from our own,
and then together responding.

I know many watched recently the PBS series about the Vietnam Era.

A colleague sent a note this week that read:

"We watched as they depicted not only a war but a time which tore apart families and communities.

It was a time which tore people away from their own moral moorings and sense of who they are."

My colleague continues, my spouse and I "looked at each other and said.... 'It is all happening again'."

It is all happening again, and we, together, can carry the gospel in this time.

During communion today, I invite you to light candles,

to pray for those who grieve, and those in need of healing, and those who live in fear,
but also to pray for our moral moorings and our sense of who we are as God's people
and how we are called to speak and boldly act.

Dear friend in Christ, in these broken times, when it feels the world is spinning out of control,
may the very life of Jesus Christ and power of the Gospel promises
free you for courage
and tether you to hope that abides. Amen