

Lectionary 27A 2017, October 8, 2017, Matthew 21:33-46, Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Lancaster, PA, Kurt S. Strause

How many times? How many times will we as a nation need to experience another mass shooting taking place in a school, in a movie theater, at a nightclub, and now at an outdoor music concert? How many times must family and friends mourn the senseless and un-necessary deaths of loved ones, innocently gunned down in a random act of violence? How many times must we listen to someone blather on that these shootings are the “price of freedom” that we must pay for a citizenry that demands an unlimited arsenal of assault weapons? How many times?

I’ve struggled with this question, and lots of others, during the past week since I woke up Monday morning to the horrific news of the Las Vegas shooting. And this event is indeed horrific. Horrific in the scale and scope of so many dead and injured, horrific in the planning and execution of the crime, horrific in the mystery surrounding the man who perpetrated it. As the weeks went by thoughts drifted back to other such occurrences; Columbine, Newtown, Virginia Tech, Charleston. They happen much too frequently in what is supposed to be a civilized, western nation. And yet we forget, because it doesn’t make the national news, that 36 people die each day in the United States due to gun violence, a number which excludes those who take their own life using a gun.

This sermon isn’t going to be about gun control. But it is going to be about violence. I struggle with how much violence there is in our society. Every once in awhile we are reminded of someone’s capacity for violence, like we were this past week in Las Vegas. But violence is with us everyday. It permeates our culture and even into our own lives in ways we are hardly aware. Road rage and domestic abuse, gang wars and drug wars, even our popular entertainment is full of violence, from the cerebral crime dramas like CSI to actual bullet-ballets of action movies, all are based on violence. This afternoon many of us will sit down to an afternoon of Sunday football, a game with ritualized violence at its core. Violence is everywhere, around us, within us, affecting our everyday lives.

Each week during whatever events are unfolding in the world, or in our community, I’m also engaging the scripture texts for the coming Sunday. It occurred to me again how violent our gospel reading is for this morning. The parable Jesus tells, about an absentee landlord and the wicked tenants of his vineyard is full of violence. The tenants beat, stone, and kill the servants the landlord sends to collect the rent. Even the landlord’s son, thought to be safe from violence, is thrown outside the vineyard and killed. But the landlord is not exempt from retribution. When Jesus asks what he will do to the tenants, the Pharisees emphasize the power of retribution, “He will put those wretches to a miserable death.” This is a very violent passage of scripture. It may lead us to wonder, “does God approve of this sort of violence?” Given Jesus’ immediate response about how those who reject him will be treated as they miss the coming kingdom one might be led to believe so.

The images from Las Vegas this past week, thinking about violence in our society, and then reading this passage of scripture, almost gave me a sense of despair that violence is permanently a part of life. But then I recall where the narrative of Matthew’s gospel is going to take us. It too leads to an act of violence; in which Jesus the parable-teller, is taken out of the city

and crucified on a trash heap. The innocent Son and heir, just like in the parable. And then suddenly it's not the same. The parable reflects how humans respond to violence: with more violence. But the violent crucifixion of the Son of God is not responded to with more violence, but rather with resurrection. God absorbs and takes up all our human violence into himself and, with Jesus rising from the dead, gives us peace.

The cross and resurrection of Jesus is God's complete and whole declaration to a world gone mad that violence is never the way to true life. Jesus is not raised from the dead in order to exact a vengeance on those who crucified him. Jesus returns from the dead to instruct his disciples to take the Good News of the Gospel to the whole world. This Good News is that in Jesus God has brought an end to vengeance and violence. They will never have the last and final word about human life, or human history, or human culture. God's love and mercy and peace will always have the last word.

Those who do not yet see the victory of peace Jesus has in store for us will always be hampered by seeing violence as the only answer to violence. "Treat criminals more harshly, they get what they deserve." Maybe at times we ourselves are so clouded in our minds that we too fail to see the Jesus as the goal of everything, and we fall back into the rest of the crowds silently approving of violence as a response to violence. But the Good News of Jesus says to us there is always another way forward. A way that looks to the cross and resurrection, a way with peace as its goal and outcome.

We, and here I mean those who are named and claimed by the Lord, are the ones in this world called to live by a different sort of vision. We see the end. We know the end will bring Jesus and his victory of peace. Our imaginations are freed from the captivity of seeing violence as the only answer to violence; freed to see that Jesus' resurrection creates more possibilities than others can see. We can be the leaven of peace in a world that has made itself sick from feeding on violence.

We are naturally shocked and angered and grief-stricken when violence strikes us. The calls to make such violence less likely are a natural response and we must never despair that such efforts will be fruitless. For we are a people ultimately shaped by hope. Hope in the victory of Jesus' resurrection. Hope in the power of his peace. And hope is always the birthplace of faithful action, resolve, and compassion. Amen.