

VULNERABLE TO A VIOLENT WORLD

God of peace, sending your word vulnerable to a violent world: take from us the closed fist of death; reveal to us the open arms of love that we might stumble and fall into your hands, through Jesus Christ, our victim and our savior.

A Collect for Proper 22, Prayers for An Inclusive Church

THE EIGHTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST BAPTISM OF IDABELLE SARAH STALLING

Proper 22A: Isaiah 5:1-7; Psalm 80:7-14; Philippians 3:4b-14; Matthew 21:33-46

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ST. MARK'S-IN-THE-VALLEY

EPISCOPAL CHURCH AND PRESCHOOL

Los Olivos, California

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THE GOSPEL READING: MATTHEW 21:33-46

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. The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls."

When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they realized that he was speaking about them. They wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowds, because they regarded him as a prophet.

It goes without saying that we have all been rocked by the senseless violence of the Las Vegas

shootings this week.

So we come to church, and maybe, if you're Samantha and

Rob, you bring your baby to be baptized, and... you get a violent gospel reading....

So hearing this gospel reading there's some confirmation of what we know, that, while this latest violence is near to us and unnerving in particular ways, violence is – throughout history – a constant in the human experience.

We know that many people throughout the world are experiencing horrendous violence in unrelenting terrorism and war every day. Whether due to the ubiquitous nature of the flow of information or an actual shift – maybe in some tactics of violence – it seems the pervasiveness and extent of violence are on the rise, though we can also remember broad scale events like genocide, the Holocaust, for instance, and nuclear war are also part of the human story.

What's disturbing about the parable in the gospel reading is how it ends – and how it appears that Jesus is saying that God will fight violence with more violence (“he will put those wretches to a miserable death”) – the cycle we prove over and over again does not work anywhere ever. If it did, violence would have long ago been eradicated.

As the majority of gospel readings this year are from Matthew, I've reminded us before

that the gospel according to Matthew, far more than Mark or Luke, portrays a harsh attitude towards Jewish religious leaders, and division and conflict within the whole Jewish community, living under violent occupiers. What we know from history is this gospel was written in the time following the previously unimaginable destruction of the Jewish temple in Jerusalem by Rome. The entire Jewish community was set on edge by that violence.

At the same time, traditional Jewish worshippers and Jewish followers of Jesus, who had previously coexisted in the synagogue, were now dividing – and the language of religious contention and conflict was intensifying and made its way into this narrative of the life of Jesus as told by human Matthew.

So, while we can understand this language as being the expression of a threatened religious minority, it is regrettable in how it came to be used in eras when Christians were not the minority, nor threatened, and became threatening to others through more violence.

Religious violence is always a perversion and never an expression of the fullness of God.

We can feel locked in, until we look beyond both the violence of our world and the violence in the

language of religious leaders to the actual actions of Jesus and specifically to the crucifixion, in which, beyond words, the action of Jesus and the work of God was very different than what is portrayed in this parable.

The faithfulness of Jesus on the cross addressed and transformed the core issue of human violence through directly facing, entering into, experiencing, and absorbing the violence of the world, taking it in, revealing not retribution, but resurrection, new life, new possibility, hope, peace, compassion for all people and the whole world.

And so to be Christ followers, people of the Way, is to be people who have the Easter reality as our essential identity and, thus, to live as if death were not, and, as a result, to travel a different path, to create alternatives to violence, to build, not destroy, to harbor and express undying hope.

This work of Christ is in the world and thrives not only among people who explicitly understand themselves as Christian or friends of Christ, but is a gift to all people, all places, for all time. The potential of God's possibilities in creation and in redemption of the world are never limited to a creed, a catechism, a certain religious group. No, the work of Christ was and is for the whole world, and

finds its way anytime any people turn away from destruction or polarization to find connection, wholeness, mercy, redemption, restoration.

So we can observe the God of undying love in action in all sorts of places we may expect and in all sorts of places and people who might surprise us.

If we look, we can see, time and again, the rising up of compassionate action in the face of senseless violence – and by now you may have your favorite story of something you've heard from the Las Vegas incident – but vast amounts of human capability, resourcefulness, and restorative response of people has arisen in the wake of the destruction caused by the shooter. There is even some sense that people are increasingly ready to enter new conversations about gun violence in our country, moving together from the now familiar avenues of political polarization.

So for us, the work is continual commitment to the life for which we are created and to which we have been called, what we explicitly state and reaffirm in the Baptismal Covenant today, which points beyond words to action day by day – action we take individually and together in small ways and large continually, perpetually.

We may feel life is hanging in

the balance, maybe to be overtaken by violence or maybe not... but, in fact, all of the hanging in the balance is over. As I said last week: Jesus has already done the hanging.... and compassion was the outcome. The results are known....

Yes, sometimes our anger, our grief, our horror, our fear will make religious authorities, civil authorities, or any us want to opt for the “put those wretches to a miserable death” approach we heard in this gospel reading.

But now we have the opportunity to make our best, enduring, clearest, strongest and truest response to the Las Vegas shooting, which is this baptism of

Idabelle Sarah Stalling.

Here we say that God’s love and mercy reach out to us, form an indissoluble bond with us, and fix our lives forever in the practice of hope in this real world. Together with Idabelle, we will stand bravely in the life of God against all the powers of darkness and death, and remain engaged in faithful action to the end of our lives.

All of this is God’s ongoing gift to us, God who became vulnerable to a violent world and, with arms of love open on the cross, was not only victim but savior.

Idabelle takes her place with us in his crucified and resurrected body in the world today.



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