

Sermon – Proper 22 – Cathedral of the Incarnation

Matthew 21:33-46 – Parable of the Vineyard Owner

Last Sunday afternoon we celebrated the Feast of St Francis. The nave was full people and many, many animals. As we gather here this morning I feel there is now an elephant in the room. Something large and weighty and something we might all wish wasn't here.

A few hours after we gathered last Sunday afternoon an unspeakable act of violence rocked our country yet again. Violence rained down upon the unsuspecting country music fans who had gathered last weekend in Las Vegas to relax and enjoy some music. One man, whose motivations are still unclear, unleashed a barrage of automatic gunfire that ended the lives of 58 mostly young people, physically scarred the lives of some 500 more and traumatized countless others.

Our country has a problem with violence between humans. In Chicago 58 people died of gun violence in 28 days last month. In Baltimore, it took only in 68 days for 58 people to die of gun violence. In St Louis, it was 70 days. In Philadelphia 105 days and Kansa City 117 days, and I could go on and on.

What are we as a community to make of this continually escalating violence that randomly strikes down mostly young people? Is this how we want our lives to be lived? Yet again the headline reads "the biggest mass shooting in the United States." Each successive mass shooting seems to out-do the others. One day it might be our family or community that feels the weight of this violence first hand. What then?

Violence between people, often seeded by deep internal anger, is nothing new to our human existence. In fact, violence has been a part of human interaction since our creation but that's no reason to accept it. Anger, that powerful emotion, builds within some to a point where they can't control it and it explodes within the community as an act of violence. Anger and violence are also contagious within a community. The anger of many builds now in online chat forums until one day when it too is released often with tragic consequences like Charlottesville. Fire arms, bombs, acid and other violent mechanisms get used to spread the rage against the targeted other.

With each of these horrendous episodes many of us might despair that this country seems locked into this cycle of violence with seemingly no way out. Family after family, community after community are impacted by this senseless slaughter of the innocents.

Politicians react by sending their thoughts and prayers to the victims but for me that doesn't cut it anymore. We must change as a people, as a community. We must say NO MORE! ENOUGH! Let's take a different road, one that respects each human life and upholds each person's dignity, one that cares for the mentally ill, for those suffering with addiction, and for those that feel angry and rejected. No more racism and no more rejection. Surely none of us want to be touched by these mass shootings and further community violence.

The parable of the vineyard owner has much to teach us this morning. When we are in a position like the vineyard owner we can choose to take two very different paths. One that violently removes the offending party or one that rejects violence as a way of solving a problem.

Jesus tells the parable to the chief priests and elders of the temple using an everyday example. If Jesus was telling it today it might go like this. An investor creates a viable business selling wine online through a new app. The investor then hires a group of smart young things to run the business whilst she goes away to France to setup a similar business. At the end of the latest vintage when she anticipates that the bulk of the wine should have been sold, she sends one of her workers to collect the profits. But the worker never returns. She later hears that the worker was severely beaten and remains in hospital. So, she sends someone else. Still no word. She later finds out that person disappeared. How can this be? So finally, exasperated she sends her only son, to find out what is happening. He is murdered.

What should she do? Well those gathered at her church in Bordeaux tell her to hire a standover man to go and remove the workers from the business either through taking them out or hurting them so bad they can't function again. Then she can install new management and start all over again. Will the outcome be different this time around?

We might think to ourselves that the investor should have taken more drastic action when the first worker was attacked. Her patience and persistence was not rewarded. In fact, the business workers repudiated her authority as the owner and thought of themselves as more worthy of taking what was created by another.

Instead of taking the route of violence as a remedy for an offense, Jesus chastised the temple leadership for not recalling scripture, especially Isaiah's account of a corrupted vineyard business and Psalm 118 which recalls the very essence of the Lord's salvation and position. "The stone that the builder rejected has become the chief cornerstone. This is the Lord's doing; it is marvelous in our eyes." The unsuitable stone, the stumbling stone has become the key foundation stone for the building, and for the world. The cornerstone is laid first and sets the orientation of the building and from it all other parts flow.

When we forget, or fail to acknowledge Jesus as the cornerstone of our lives, we are more apt to remain out of alignment and off balance. We are then more likely to put ourselves first and to reject the prophetic voice and the Lord's purpose for us. We reject the one who has provided the opportunity to prosper. We reject the cornerstone of life, the one who has gifted us with what we need to sustain life in family and community.

When we accept the incarnate God in Jesus the Christ, we are shown the way to orientate our lives and to come into relationship with God and each other. We learn to see that all things flow from God and are gifts for us – love, respect, peace, knowledge, education, family, work and so on. This reorientation of our lives is an ongoing part of our faith journey and is never completely done. It starts at our baptism and with how we are raised by our families, and continues when we mature enough to set our own life course.

As we make this change the community of faith, the body of Christ, is our supportive community. Today as we Christen [] we all, as a faith community, will answer “we will” when we are asked to support him in his life in Christ. We also seek to support each other in learning about and maturing in Christ and to support those outside our community who struggle to find a loving God in their lives. This is what true stewardship is all about. Providing for the needs of others, by sharing the gifts God has provided each of us, as we work together to orientate our community towards God, and a less violent future.

Valuing life and seeking to uphold the dignity of every human has lead us into relationship with Cheyenne River Episcopal Ministries who provide Episcopal leadership and pastoral care to the people of the Cheyenne River Lakota Nation in northern South Dakota. I was privileged to visit with them last year and to learn of the many challenges facing the people of this community and the priests who seek to walk with them.

The forced relocation of the Lakota after their defeat by the United States forces in the late 19th c has led to isolation and endemic poverty, high youth suicide rates, social unrest, low life expectancies and profound sadness and despair. Two thirds of the population, some 5,500 people, live on much less than one-third of the average American income. These are largely forgotten people.

We are seeking to deepen our relationship with CREM so that we can share together life’s walk, learn from each other, provide for each other out of God’s bounty, and give respite to the clergy who work in a state of constant grief.

Life in this world will continue to present us with challenges like the tragic slaughter of innocent people, until we as a community say ENOUGH and rise-up to make change happen. As stewards of God’s creation, and as beneficiaries, we have an obligation to share God’s love, to protect our neighbors, to promote peace and reconciliation and to effect real change in God’s kingdom.

During this month, where we are focusing on stewardship, please pray for this community that we might see clearly how God is working in our lives and calling us to support the work of our community to orientate people away from violence and back to God. Please also pray that we can be courageous enough to stand up, to be engaged and to reject the status quo.

I know want to introduce Richard Stelle who is going to share some of his thoughts and experience of being a steward of God’s gifts.