

Isaiah 5:1-7
Philippians 3:4b-14
Matthew 21:33-46

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This Sunday's parable is about violence and justice, greed and hope, rejection and acceptance, with tragic repercussions. In this tale of the absentee landlord, perhaps the renters felt they deserved more for their hard work in the vineyard. Somehow, this sense of entitlement morphed into malicious greed, scandalously afflicting abuse and murder upon the owner's staff and eventually his son. This was no act of revenge on their part, but a senseless act of violence toward people who had done them no wrong, and in fact had kindly allowed them access to property they didn't own in order to make a living.

This tragedy is unfair and outrageous on so many levels. In the face of such evil, God seems to be as absent as the landlord. We can't wrap our heads and hearts around such acts of terrorism toward the victims. Why do bad things happen to good people?

Last month, our nation kept a vigilant watch over communities hard hit by hurricanes, forest fires, and earthquakes. The insurance industry would call these acts of God, even if I beg to differ. They are natural disasters, to be sure, for the most part. Perhaps someone did set the fires. Perhaps there are locations where it was not wise to build, and shoddy construction which couldn't hold up to powerful storms. We still feel bad for the victims and should demonstrate compassion. What preventive measures could anybody take to prevent such tragedy?

Last Sunday's news of a gunman opening fire from a hotel overlooking a country music concert in Las Vegas has shocked our whole nation. It may not be defined as a political act of terrorism, but the carnage certainly terrorized thousands of people present, consequently millions of Americans, killing at least 58 people and wounding more than 500 others in the deadliest shooting in modern U.S. history. What is this world coming to?

I remember someone defining evil as the absence of God. We've heard how God is love, and how heaven is light in the midst of darkness. The reality of evil doesn't seem hard to prove. Can we make a case for the reality of good? Is there reason for hope in the midst of despair, healing in our woundedness, blessings amidst our burdens and sorrows, courage in the face of fear?

It seems the adage about life's proverbial cup of blessing being half empty and half full applies in all circumstances. Occasionally we might relate to Psalm 23's image of one's cup overflowing with goodness and mercy, but too often we feel drained. We want to pray "Thy will be done" and yet ... what God seems to allow through human free will is painfully disillusioning.

While this mortal world may never return to the Garden of Eden, we can't help but wonder what's wrong with its tenants! None of us should afflict violence nor be allowed to have weapons of mass destruction toward anybody.

It's tragic when someone trashes his or her own life, but utterly demonic when afflicting mayhem on unsuspecting and undeserving victims. Violence too often begets more violence.

We sort of understand the concept of karma, how what goes around, comes around, and people who deserve punishment should get what's coming to them. Sadly, this doesn't seem to adequately bring justice, nor the healing peace needed to inspire and renew the hope and faith of wounded people.

This parable is a Passion prediction, how Jesus would bear the weight of our sinful world as an undeserving sacrificial lamb. It's a painfully scandalous indictment of how people rationalize their bad behavior and corrupt moral code in the choices they make, afflicting the innocent. The death of Jesus should have been the final nail in the coffin of goodness, bringing God's wrath upon us all.

Easter is the only response to transform tragedy, to bring ultimate grace when it wasn't deserved, to even forgive what is unforgivable, with a message of life and hope beyond the grave. Rejection is not the end of the story. Violence doesn't have the last word. Hate doesn't have the upper hand. There is a cornerstone to rebuild our lives when every blessing we took for granted was taken away. Blessed are the peacemakers, for theirs is the Kingdom of God. Blessed are those who weep, for they shall be comforted. God's ultimate power is the presence of whatever is good, whatever is noble, whatever brings healing, what restores faith, hope and love. The blind shall see, the deaf will hear, the lame will again walk and dance, and speechless people will be able to sing God's praises. This is what will bring a taste of Heaven on earth, when the lion and the lamb live together in peace, and the children be able to laugh and play ... the young adults shall again have visions and the elderly share their dreams and life lessons.

It may not make sense to people whose world has come apart at the seams or been blown to hell. Yet such a response by those who have experienced God's grace in their own wounded journeys might prove to be the only ones who can show them the way on the path of healing. It is the calling Jesus has given to those who follow Him, those who want to help people rebuild their lives and this weary world.

The Cross is a symbol of rejection, of pain, of failure, and of all the evil this world can dish out. Jesus knew what it was to be utterly betrayed. He saw it coming, and yet proclaimed: "The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this is the Lord's doing, and it is amazing in our eyes!" We are given hope in the face of rejection. Trust God! Don't give up on life, nor cave in to despair. Don't consign yourself to the forlorn group without hope. Trust the God who restores broken dreams.

The apostle Paul in his letter to the Philippians readily acknowledges his experiences of suffering and rejection, demonstrating a mature understanding of life's realities and its limitations. But Paul also expresses the goal which kept him going, saying: "I want to know Christ and the power of His resurrection and the sharing of His sufferings by becoming like Him ... (so) I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus."

We are all accountable to the Owner of the vineyard. There are some who will not inherit the Kingdom of God. Just keep your own feet planted firmly on the cornerstone of our faith. In Jesus, we shall find hope, our hurts be healed, and our spiritual muscles

to run the race of faith be strengthened. Someday we might even discover God's purposes at work in the face of painful tragedies, recognizing Christ's presence, wiping away tears to declare with joy: "This was the Lord's doing, and it is amazing in our eyes!"

Amen.