

Isaiah 5:1-7

Let me sing for my beloved my love-song concerning his vineyard: My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. ²He dug it and cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines; he built a watchtower in the midst of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it; he expected it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes. ³And now, inhabitants of Jerusalem and people of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard.

⁴What more was there to do for my vineyard that I have not done in it? When I expected it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes? ⁵And now I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard. I will remove its hedge, and it shall be devoured; I will break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down. ⁶I will make it a waste; it shall not be pruned or hoed, and it shall be overgrown with briars and thorns; I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it. ⁷For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts is the house of Israel, and the people of Judah are his pleasant planting; he expected justice, but saw bloodshed; righteousness, but heard a cry!

Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20

¹Then God spoke all these words: ²I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; ³you shall have no other gods before me. ⁴You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. ⁷You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not acquit anyone who misuses his name.

⁸Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. ⁹Six days you shall labor and do all your work. ¹²Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you. ¹³You shall not murder. ¹⁴You shall not commit adultery. ¹⁵You shall not steal. ¹⁶You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. ¹⁷You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.

¹⁸When all the people witnessed the thunder and lightning, the sound of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking, they were afraid and trembled and stood at a distance, ¹⁹and said to Moses, “;You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, or we will die.” ²⁰Moses said to the people, “Do not be afraid; for God has come only to test you and to put the fear of him upon you so that you do not sin.”

Matthew 21:33-46

³³“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. ³⁴When the harvest time had come, he sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his produce. ³⁵But the tenants seized his slaves and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. ³⁶Again he sent other slaves, more than the first; and they treated them in the same way. ³⁷Finally he sent his son to them, saying, ‘They will respect my son.’ ³⁸But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, ‘This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance.’ ³⁹So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him. ⁴⁰Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?” ⁴¹They 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.”

⁴²Jesus 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’? ⁴³Therefore 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. ⁴⁴The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls.” ⁴⁵When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they realized that he was speaking about them. ⁴⁶They wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowds, because they regarded him as a prophet.

Grapes and Wrath

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There is a fable about the Angel Gabriel who has just come from surveying the earth and its inhabitants when he reports to God. "Lord, it's my duty to inform you that you're the possessor of a choice piece of real estate known as planet earth. But the tenants you've leased it out to are destroying it. In another few years, it won't be fit to live in. They have polluted your rivers. The air is fouled with the stench of their over-consumerism. They frequently kill one another, and all the prophets you've sent to them calling for an accounting have met with violence. By any rule of sound management, Lord, you've got but one option." Then raising his trumpet to his lips, Gabriel asked, "Shall I sound the eviction notice now, sir?"

And God said, "No, Gabriel! No, not just yet. I know you are right, but I keep thinking if I just give them a little more time they'll quit acting like they own the place!"

What a tragic and disturbing week it has been. Once again, we are faced with another horrific shooting in our country. A shooting that is almost beyond imagination. And yet, the powers that be in our government and society say, "Let's not talk about it right now. Let's wait for the shock to wear off, let's not talk about guns in our country, until...next time. Do you think this is God's will for us? I wonder. And I struggle with many questions and have many worries about us as a people and nation. Let me say that is increasingly difficult to be anything but prophetic in the pulpit these days. My personal outrage may cloud my good judgement, so I'll ask forgiveness ahead of time.

The gospel parable that Jesus shares clearly suggests that this world, this creation, this life we are living, is leased to us from God. Even the church herself belongs to God. We are merely caretakers, the role given to us in the creation stories. The world and her people do not belong to us and we can't do whatever we want without consequence. The Landlord has come calling and the rent is due!

God created and built something good and what did he get in return? Wild Grapes! Selfish and greedy tenants! God expected justice, God expected righteousness, God expected mercy, grace, love, and kindness! This is the produce of God's vineyard. God apparently didn't screen his renters. Someone didn't read the instructions very well. If God had read the label on the human package it would have said, "Humans, capable of incredible goodness when staying connected to the Divine source. But also, capable of incredible cruelty, hatred, selfishness, greed, and easily worships idols. Such as patriotism, affluence, power over others, and maybe even the NRA.

This parable of Jesus was told to remind his colleagues in ministry, as well as you and me, that the gifts of God are for the people of God. That as the people of God, not only those in the story but you the church as well, should take the gifts and properties, the symbolic vineyards of our lives, all the blessings that God has provided, and use them to bring justice, equality, love, redemption, transformation, peace, and care for all the world. The day we forget that simple fact is the day we diminish the Kingdom and we make the Good News a lie! (The pastor is on a rant now! Somebody tell him to take a deep breath!)

So where is the Good News today? How do we offer a word of eternal hope in this moment when our hearts are raging with grief? For me, the real hope is that while those gathered around Jesus think that those terrible tenants should be killed, Jesus doesn't affirm or agree. And we don't really know from the text who it was that thought they should be killed. We have to assume that the disciples, as well as others, were gathered around when this parable was shared. That sort of changes the dynamic a bit, doesn't it? Jesus isn't just talking to the chief priests. The crowds and disciples may have been the ones to voice that response.

However, Jesus certainly lets them all know that if they don't change their ways, repent and change their minds, that they may lose their place in the kingdom. But he doesn't condemn them to any gruesome fate. The good news is that God is still the one who provides. This parable is more about the God who is merciful than the tenants who are wicked. He is the Land owner who keeps sending servant after servant after servant to call us to do his

will and then he sends his son, Jesus, who calls us again to repent. And even after being crucified returns to his people in his resurrected heavenly self and still calls us to return. Repent, turn again and love that which your heavenly father loves and do righteousness and justice.

The vineyard remains, perhaps in need of some new renters, but the provisions of God are still there. As Isaiah said, “the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the people of Judah are his pleasant planting.” And I think I can say without a doubt that this is the good news! That you are the pleasant planting of God’s love on this earth. You are the ones caring for the vineyard now. You are the ones who are called to produce good fruit in this world. Fruits of love and compassion, good works, fairness, justice, equality, tolerance, hope, joy, steadfastness; the sweet and holy wine that God expects from us and his vineyard. How we live in this vineyard, and the produce we give back to God, may determine our place in the Kingdom, I suppose. I hope we have a long-term lease. We can continue to reject him however. The choice is ours of course.

I know this topic of gun violence and gun control is one that divides us as a people and even as a church. And we have a tendency to think that these questions are either/or. Conversations, if they happen at all, tend to be all or nothing conversations. I don’t think it has to be that way. We need to work towards a middle ground, and for those of us who follow and love Jesus, we need to lead the way. We need to be voices of peace and compassion, living sacrificial lives. Sometimes, and I see this often in the biblical narrative, we surrender our wants, for the greater good of all people. Isn’t that what Jesus did? Isn’t that what Paul asked believers to do? I don’t know why we resist that so much but we do. Perhaps had we been tending the vineyard with more care this poor soul might have not lost his way so completely.

And there are those who’ve suggested that prayers and thoughts are meaningless in this time for obvious action. However, I believe that prayer is important and does make a difference so, if you can do nothing else, by all means pray, and send good thoughts out into the world. Don’t ever stop doing that.

I want to leave you with a song that may speak to you in a different way. It is of course, lyrics by Carolyn Winfrey Gillette which she wrote after another horrific shooting, and it goes like this.

To a Place of Celebration BEACH SPRING, *The Sacred Harp*, 1844; attributed to Benjamin Franklin White ("God Whose Giving Knows No Ending") Text: Copyright © 2016 by Carolyn Winfrey Gillette. All rights reserved.

To a place of celebration filled with laughter, dancing, joy,
Came such violent devastation — one man's efforts to destroy.
God, we grieve for loved ones taken; we lament, "What can we do?"
Now, we're feeling lost and shaken; heal our nation! Make us new!

Weapons kill — and so does silence; hear our prayer as we confess:
We have given in to violence, we have bowed to hopelessness.
God, we've lost our sense of vision of a world where there will be
Plowshares made from violent weapons, justice in society.

Give our leaders strength for action, give them minds to mend our flaws,
Give them courage and compassion, and the will to change our laws.
May we work for legislation that will curb guns' awful toll.
God, renew our dedication to a world that's just and whole.

Give us love to change our vision; give us love to cast out fear.
Give us love to speak with wisdom — love to work for justice here.
Give us love to welcome difference — love no hatred can destroy.
Only love can stop the violence; only love will bring back joy.

Let those with ears to hear, Listen. Amen.