

“The World We Are Making”  
October 8, 2017  
Text: Matthew 21:33-46

Island Heights UMC, Island Heights, NJ  
Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost

*"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.*

#### The Absence of God

Once again, this has been a difficult week. Another wave of painful tragedy has gone through the land. We are mourning the loss of innocent lives, and we are unsettled about what comes next. The shooting in Las Vegas is another shocking reminder we live a violent world. Sadly, it's nothing new. In today's passage from the Gospel of

Matthew there is violence. There was violence then, and there is violence now. What a mess! And has anyone seen God?

Killing, stoning, beating, crucifying, pain and suffering, these are the violent actions of human beings—one against another. This while there are violent storms in the natural world, earthquakes and fires—all the things that make a person shake a fist skyward and holler, “Where in the world is God?!” Just like the landowner in the parable who puts together a fine vineyard with a protective fence, a watchtower, and a wine press, God has created a spectacular world. But just like the landowner, once completed, God seems to go away, leaving it in the hands of the tenants. Which leads to our even bigger question: Why is God allowing all this evil in the world? How could something like Las Vegas happen?

God has given us a vineyard that is designed to produce fruit. But something has gone wrong and we are in a world of trouble.

### The Nature of Humanity

Envy and greed. The wicked tenants in the parable are poisoned with it. They want that vineyard for themselves, and when the owner sends his servants to collect the fruit at the time of harvest, they sadly, but naturally, act out violently in manifestations of their envy and greed. Oh, the things human beings are capable of, especially when we are ruled by envy, greed, lust for power, and contempt for others. And this how violence comes into being.

But violence is only the symptom. Treating symptoms will never cure the disease. The symptoms are the end result, the indicators that something is rotten down at the core. Las Vegas is a symptom. The everyday violence in Chicago is a symptom. The ideological divide in the United States that is tearing our society apart is just an end-result symptom. These are all the outward manifestations of a deeper seated problem that begins in our heart when we fail to see another human being as made in the image of God—when we forget to even see ourselves as made in that divine image. Imagine how quickly violence will disappear if and when we fully realize in whose image we are all created.

But we are not there yet. And so the pain and suffering continues. We are in this beautiful vineyard, but we keep messing up and producing fruit that is less than beautiful. And we cannot fix it on our own. Our human nature simply lacks the ability. We need God’s grace. We need God’s long-suffering patience and forgiveness as we continue to fall down along the way. We need someone to show us the way.

### The Cost of Rejecting Jesus

He calls himself a stone. Jesus refers to himself as the cornerstone. In today’s Scripture the landowner sends his son to the vineyard. This is his third attempt to gather the fruit at the harvest. The servants he already sent have been beaten, stoned, and killed by the wicked tenants. He responds to their violence by sending his son. *“They will respect my son.”*

*“Look,” they say, “here comes the heir of the vineyard! Let’s kill him and get his inheritance.”*

We know through this parable Jesus is not being subtle about the story being about him. Only a short time later he will be arrested, tortured, and killed on a cross. He clearly sees the violence closing in around him and still goes forward with his ministry and challenges the status quo and stands up for what is right and just and true.

*“They will respect my son,”* says the father.

*“Kill him,”* say the wicked tenants. Jesus knows only a few more lines can be crossed before he finally triggers the wrath of the authorities, and still he preaches good news to the poor and brokenhearted, and teaches those who want to learn, and heals the ones who no one else wants to touch.

*“They will respect my son,”* says the father.

*“Kill him,”* say the wicked and violent tenants. And that’s what they do.

He calls himself a stone; a rejected stone; that now becomes the cornerstone. There is a cost for rejecting Jesus. Not only is there a loss, a missing out on all that comes with faith in Christ, but there’s a greater price to pay. It’s the removal of the vineyard from wicked tenants when it is given to others who will produce fruit. A generous Creator gives us a vineyard, which is designed to produce fruit. Jesus comes to collect the fruit. How will we receive the son of the owner?

### The World We Are Making

Yes, it has been another very difficult week for us. We are grieving. The pain is real and it is deep within us. And as we search for answers, the best we can do in these times is hold on to each other for dear life and believe that better times are ahead. But every time something like what happened in Las Vegas shatters our world, we are forced to consider how we will respond. What kind of world will we make going forward? And what will be the fruit of our labor? Thank God it is not too late to show our children, by our example, a better way than the cycle of violence we are living through today. Thankfully, God’s patience and desire for our healing as a human race keeps giving us more time and another chance. The good news is that the vineyard has not yet been taken away.

But for anything to change we will need God’s grace. Any good we ever do will only come from the Holy Spirit moving in our lives. But we will always have a choice in all we do. What kind of fruit will we produce? What will we do when Jesus shows up?

So where is God in times like this? As pointed out in our Bible study this week we see God in the people who rush in to help when all around there is chaos; we witness God in the rescue; we feel God in the healing hands of skilled medical personnel; we hear God in the kind, consoling words in the wake of grief; and we know God in the voices that cry out for justice and for peace and for an end to violence. God is with us through it all.

Why is it that we love babies and young children so much? Because they are a glimpse into the face of God, and we cannot get enough of them. For the sake of Olivia and her sister Ava, we have a responsibility for the world we are making. It is not too late to turn back to the way that leads to healing, wholeness and a fruitful life if we can remember in whose image we are all made. Amen.