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

Philippians 3:4-14

Matthew 21:33-46

We have a story in today’s gospel lesson that is simple and yet very strange. Jesus intends it as an allegory with each of the characters representing something other than what’s at face value. As so often happens with his parables, we are left off-kilter, wondering what to make of the message. It’s ambiguous. Fortunately, we Episcopalians are very comfortable with ambiguity. We don’t mind the gray zone, unlike some other faith traditions that believe life falls into categories of black or white. Jesus doesn’t mind ambiguity either. He must have been an Episcopalian!

The story features a landowner, likely of significant means. He’s rich. He plants a vineyard with all the trappings: wine press; watchtower; fencing. We know something about this. We’re gardeners. We know about fences. They keep dogs in and deer out. In my humble opinion they are about the least permanent of any human endeavor. Ice cubes last longer than fences. And we live in an area filled with grapevines. Even so, I didn’t realize it takes years for vines to produce fruit. It takes at least three years. So this man has made a sizeable investment with no return on it for at least three seasons.

Once he starts to see some grape production, he leaves the country. Puts tenants in charge. When he sends out the annual rent bill, the tenants do the oddest things. They beat up and stone and even kill the rent collectors. They have the audacity to kill the landowner’s son thinking, with some perverse logic, that once the heir is dead, they will inherit this gravy train.

Of course, we know the story is allegorical. It represents God, the people of God and the prophets. They are the ones who have been beaten up, stoned and killed by the people of God. And of course, there is the Son of God; the heir in the story: murdered as well. We also know the story is intended for the religious elite – the chief priests and Pharisees – who have come to represent for Jesus what happens when humans take religion and squeeze the last drop of God out of it.

But there’s an interesting thing that occurs in the telling of the story. Jesus asks his listeners, “When the owner of the vineyard returns, what will he do to those tenants?” His listeners are the ones who pronounce judgment. They say, “He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and lease the vineyard to others.”

Those wretches. Death: *miserable* death. This is some serious judgment. These people are speaking from a perspective of moral outrage. “Outrage” is anger but there is another component to “moral outrage.” And that is disgust. Psychology researchers argue that people need the combination of anger and disgust to get to moral outrage.[[1]](#footnote-1)

That may be where many Americans are today after last week’s shooting in Las Vegas. By some counts over 1,500 mass shootings have taken place since the shootings at Sandy Hook Elementary almost five years ago. That's just under one *mass* shooting a day. This doesn’t include individual homicides and accidental gunshots.

Bishop Rob O’Neill posted a message online the day after at least 59 people were mowed down at a music concert in Vegas; more than 500 injured. He said, “The shootings in Las Vegas are a tragedy. But an even greater tragedy is that they are a sad marker of the violence bearing all of us along its destructive path unless we respond mindfully and courageously.”

There is an organization of 70 Episcopal Bishops in the US, including our own, called *Bishops United Against Gun Violence.* They issued a statement this week that says, in part:

As Christians, we must reflect upon the mass killings that unfold with such regularity in our country. We must look into our own hearts and examine how we are complicit in the gun violence surrounding us daily. And having looked into our hearts, we must act. We are called to engage in the debates that shape how Americans live and die. Yet a probing conversation on issues of gun violence continues to elude us as a nation. This failure is cause for repentance and shame.

It is at this point that the bishops take a political stand. An unpopular stand for many, including many in Mesa County. In becoming political, our bishops are standing alongside all those ancient Hebrew prophets who were beaten, stoned and killed for saying what was unpopular. Our bishops write:

It is entirely reasonable in the wake of mass killings perpetrated with assault weapons to ask lawmakers to remove such weapons from civilian hands. It is imperative to ask, as early as this very week, why Congress is likely to pass a bill making it easier to buy silencers, a piece of equipment that makes it more difficult for law enforcement officials to detect gunfire as shootings unfold.

It’s possible that this massacre will be different because it wasn’t self-contained. It wasn’t contained within one community alone because Las Vegas exists only as a destination location. As all its visitors head home they will take the trauma with them. They will be forever changed. There are at least four people from the Grand Valley that we know of already who were there and who have sought our prayers. Their names have been given to members of our prayer team. They need us to bear them in our hearts with love.

Our bishop notes that we are complicit in the violence of our culture – either actively or passively, through our avoidance or complacency. He urges courageous self-examination and says, “To be obedient to Jesus is to listen attentively and respond to the unsettling movement of the Spirit. To follow Jesus is to consider that God actually speaks to us through the events of our world and to ask what God might be calling us to do.”

Tragic events like the shootings in Las Vegas give us cause to mourn, they should also jar us into moral outrage. We need to admit our grief, to mourn and weep with those who weep. But as Richard Rohr has written, "If we do not transform our pain, we will certainly transmit it."

1. Art Markman, “Ulterior Motives: The Emotions Underlying Moral Outrage,” Psychology Today,

   Posted online Nov 12, 2013. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)