

Message for October 8, 2017

Glennon Heights Mennonite Church

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Scripture passage: Isaiah 5:1-7 and Matthew 21:33-46

Sour grapes

Sour grapes are not good fruit. I have had a bitter taste in my mouth since we heard the news of another mass shooting in Las Vegas last Sunday. Sour, sour grapes indeed.

Where did things go wrong? Why does this keep happening in our country? What is our role in responding to these seemingly unstoppable tragedies? I thought a lot about this as I reflected on our scripture passages for this morning. They are all about calamity as well.

But they don't start with calamity. They start with beauty, with generosity, with careful planning, with hope. "My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. He 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." In the Bible the vineyard is a symbol of bounty, goodness and care. It is something precious and well-loved. In both our passages from Isaiah and Matthew, we see this. A prime location is chosen with fertile ground, good for producing fine grapes. No expense is spared in the preparations. The land is cleared of stones. Choice vines are selected and planted. Security is put in place so that no one can come in from outside to wreak havoc. And arrangements are made to process the ripened grapes and store the wine. This is a setting for success. Good, sweet fruit will surely be forthcoming.

This lovely vineyard is for us: It is our earth, our home, our country, our communities. God provides a place for us to live and to flourish. Great care has been

taken. We have what we need to produce good fruit. And yet it all turns sour. “He expected it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes.” “He expected justice, but saw bloodshed; righteousness, but heard a cry!”

In the parable that Jesus tells in the book of Matthew, it is the situation in the vineyard that turns sour. The landlord establishes the vineyard with all that is needed to produce a good yield. He turns it over to tenants in good faith. However, when harvest time comes – the time to collect the good fruits – things get complicated, even downright nasty. The landlord sends his slaves (yes, this story *is* complicated in many ways to our modern ears), he sends his slaves to collect his produce. The tenants seize his slaves. They beat one, kill another, and stone another. This happens twice. Finally the landlord sends his own son to sort things out, expecting that he will receive better treatment. But the tenants seize him as well. They throw him out of the vineyard and kill him. Could this situation degenerate any further?

Of course this parable is an allegory. The people of Israel were given everything. They were the apple of God’s eye. But they turned away from God. They failed to produce good fruit. Prophets appeared to remind them of this, but they wouldn’t listen. Instead they mistreated and killed the prophets. Finally God send God’s own son to set things right, but they treated him badly as well. They rejected and killed him. Now they must reap the consequences. This interpretation of the parable seems pretty straightforward. We especially like it, because we’re not the bad guys.

But parables always open more than one door to understanding. As I reflected on this story, I began to see in it a pattern which is very familiar to us here in the U.S. in the 21st century. As do people everywhere in the world, we in the U.S. live in the vineyard

God has provided for us. Everything is set up so that we can produce good sweet grapes. But we don't always do our job well. We don't care well for the vines. We fail to fertilize and prune. We neglect our duties and it all turns sour. Instead of justice, there is bloodshed. Instead of righteousness, there is a cry. And when folks or situations point this out to us, we respond with anger and indignation. How dare you challenge our traditions, our way of doing things, our sacred cows! How dare you suggest that change is needed! Away with you! Off with your head!

I thought about this a lot this past week. I thought about how we as a country refuse to listen and learn. About how we keep doing what we're doing even though it is obviously destroying the social fabric and endangering lives. I'd like to share with you excerpts from an article by James Fallows, a national correspondent for The Atlantic magazine. He wrote this on October 2.

“Beyond the scores of people who have been killed and the hundreds who were wounded in Las Vegas yesterday, thousands of other people, though not visibly or directly injured, have had their lives changed forever. Children and parents. Husbands and wives. Brothers and sisters. Something is instantly and permanently gone from their lives.

“The dead and the wounded, and their family and friends, of course deserve support and sympathy. But their fellow countrymen should reflect on the dark truth this episode underscores. I was going to end that sentence with ‘reveals,’ but that’s not right: We know this already. We know that America will not stop these shootings. They will go on. We all know that, which makes the immediate wave of grief even worse.

“Five years ago, after what was the horrific mass shooting of that moment, the

massacre in a movie theater in Aurora, Colorado, I wrote:

“The additional sad, horrifying, and appalling point is the shared American knowledge that, beyond any doubt, this will happen again, and that it will happen in America many, many times before it occurs anywhere else.

“That remains true now. I expect it to be true five years from now. I am an optimist about most aspects of America’s resilience and adaptability, but not about reversing America’s implicit decision to let these killings go on.

“Decision? Yes. Other advanced societies have outbreaks of mass-shooting gun violence. Scotland, [in 1996](#). Australia, [in 1996 as well](#). Norway [in 2011](#). But only in the United States do they come again and again and again.

“The story of Australia’s response to its Port Arthur massacre is the most famous. A conservative government pushed through significant gun-law reforms, and the country has had [no remotely comparable](#) episode since then. The story of Scotland’s reaction to its Dunblane massacre is less familiar but is also important. The Dunblane shooting was Scotland’s version of the Newtown horror in America. A gunman killed 16 students, and a teacher, before shooting himself. A Scottish newspaper, the [Sunday Herald](#), reports what happened after gun controls were implemented in 1996:

“The year of the Dunblane massacre, gun homicides peaked at 84 across the UK—the most on record. Today, gun killings have dropped to almost a third of that. In England and Wales in 2013, the police recorded 30 gun homicides, 12 fewer than the previous year, and the lowest figure since the National Crime Recording Standard was introduced in 2002. Today, in Scotland, firearms account for just 2 percent of all homicides. Gun deaths in Scotland have dropped noticeably since the introduction of

those handgun laws.

“Three years after the Aurora shooting here in the U.S., the toll goes on. Here’s an update from the Mass Shooting Tracker of mass shootings in the U.S. just in 2017 so far: 62 people killed in January. 44 people killed in February. 58 people killed in March. 46 people killed in April. 30 people killed in May. 60 people killed in June. 42 people killed in July. 34 people killed in August. 31 people killed in September. And now 58 people killed in early October. And many, many more were wounded.

“No other society allows the massacres to keep happening. Everyone around the world knows this about the United States. It is the worst aspect of the American national identity.”

[End of the article by James Fallows]

No other society allows the massacres to keep happening. No other society refuses to listen and learn. No other society rejects the messengers that keep coming, demanding change, asking for good fruit, pleading for a return to sanity so that all may live. We are like those tenants in the vineyard, killing off the messengers while clinging to our sour grapes, telling ourselves how sweet they are even as our lips recoil and our teeth are on edge from the bitter taste.

In the book of Isaiah, justice refers to fair and equitable relationships within society grounded in the just will of the Lord and established through honest procedures. When such justice fails, it is because those who are economically and/or politically powerful have taken advantage of the weak. The results of the failure of justice are devastating. “I will remove the hedge from the vineyard,” says the Lord, “and it shall be devoured; I will break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down. I 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.” We cannot as a society perpetuate injustice and not expect repercussions. If we choose to cater to fear and violence, that’s what we will get and it will kill us. We will reap what we sow. We will no longer be a land of milk and honey. Instead we will be left only with the bitter, bitter taste of sour grapes.

This is what happens, but this is not the way it has to be. This is not what God wants or wills. We have been given a beautiful, fertile vineyard by God our Creator. We are the tenants. We are the caretakers. We are the ones who, along with our community, are responsible for the caring, the tending, the pruning and the watering of the vines. Our job, with the help of the Holy Spirit, is to produce good fruit, the sweet grapes of justice and righteousness. Fruit that is life-giving, never death-dealing. Fruit that feeds and nourishes all who eat of it and is available to all.

Franciscan Richard Rohr says that we do this by centering ourselves on God, by committing ourselves to love and by paying attention. “I am convinced that ‘the sin of the world’ is ignorant killing,” he writes. “We are destroying the world through our ignorance. We need to recognize our own personal and structural violence. The death instinct always comes from people who are unconscious, unaware, and indeed do not know what they are doing. Now we can hear Jesus on the cross and know why he said, ‘Forgive them, Father, they don’t know what they’re doing.’ When we love, we *do* know what we are doing! Love, if it is actually love, is always a highly conscious act. We do evil when we slip into unconsciousness.”

Sisters and brothers, we don't have to follow our reptilian brain. We don't have to respond in fear. We can choose to respond differently to the messengers who arrive at our gates, challenging our assumptions and begging us to change our damaging ways. We can listen to those who cry out for justice and take them seriously. We can learn. We can follow the leading of the Holy Spirit. We can make a conscious choice to cut down the vines that are producing sour grapes so that we can start once again to grow good, sweet grapes, the fruit which will feed and nourish us and the world.

So I say to you this morning, make a choice. Choose to stay conscious. Choose to love. Challenge injustice. Welcome and listen to the messengers who bring news that is hard to hear. Believe them. Then speak up for what is right and good. Cherish and take good care of the vineyard that is our collective home. Produce fruit worthy of the One who desires the safety and well-being of all.

“My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill.” The grapes from this vineyard are sweet and hope springs eternal. Amen.