

Sermon for Sunday, October 8, 2017 - "Violence Within"

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost
October 8, 2017
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Decorah, Iowa
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Beloved of God, grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus.

"When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard Jesus' parables, they realized that he was speaking about them." So at least they got something right. The Pharisees get a bad rap in the New Testament and in the Christian tradition. A Sunday School song called "I Just Wanna Be a Sheep" captures this anti-Pharisee sentiment with a verse that goes, "I don't wanna be a Pharisee, a Pharisee? I don't wanna be a Pharisee, 'cause they're not fair you see. I just wanna be a sheep, bah, bah, bah."

The Pharisees get a bad rap, but here they at least have the wisdom to know that Jesus is addressing their sin, challenging them, convicting them.

This is wisdom that we could use as a nation; it is wisdom we each need in our own lives. We are so quick to point fingers at everyone else, to identify others as the problem. In the wake of another mass shooting, Americans have spent a lot of time blaming others as we're prone to do whenever these horrific events occur. We blame "evildoers" and terrorists, the NRA, Congress, the president, video games, social media and poor parenting. It is important to address these things and the role they play in our society. We need to reflect on the larger forces shaping our life together and engage in the political process.

At the same time, we also need to look at the seeds of violence and evil within each of us. We need to consider the fruit of our own lives. Are we producing the fine grapes of justice and righteousness or the wild grapes of evil and violence?

When we take an honest look at ourselves, we see that there are all sorts of wild grapes growing. There is violence in the vineyards of our lives. Violence has a hold not only within those who commit murder like the shooter in Las Vegas or the tenants in this parable. It also lives within each of us.

Violence rarely starts as something explosive, rather it works to find tiny openings - just enough space to start to grow.

Often it begins through indifference to the needs of others, as well as indifference to our own needs. When we work beyond our weariness and deplete our reserves, when we rely too much on ourselves, then we're more prone to anger, explosiveness and reactivity. From indifference, violence spreads into impatience - impatience with our family members, other drivers on the road, and all the incompetent people we meet everywhere, especially when we're looking for them. We get easily offended and quickly move to outrage.

Violence also shows up as resentments and an unwillingness to let go of hurts and slights. We make assumptions and give ground to prejudice. We consume more and more of the earth's resources, harming the planet and others around us.

This can seem like small stuff in the face of mass shootings, but these are the ways violence takes hold and grows. As author Jan Richardson writes, "Violence doesn't spring forth fully formed, it gestates in small acts and individual hearts, and when we don't attend to what's going on inside us, the destructiveness within us accumulates and spills over into the world around us."

This parable of Jesus speaks not only to the Pharisees and chief priests but to each of us - there is violence in our vineyards.

So, what should the owner of these vineyards do in the face of the violence? What should God do about the evil within each of us? That is the question that Jesus asks the Pharisees and chief priests. They answer that the vineyard owner should put the tenants to a miserable death. They answer with the assumption of revenge and retributive justice.

They have good reasons for answering this way - this is how the world works. It is how God chose to respond to injustice and violence in the time of Isaiah when Israel's vineyard was destroyed and God's people were sent into exile. Also, the Old Testament permits taking an eye for an eye, a hand for a hand. This was intended to encourage proportional responses to violence. If you lost an eye, you could only respond by taking another's eye, you couldn't take their life. But it quickly became vindication for seeking revenge. So, the Pharisees and chief priests have good reason to think the landowner will destroy the tenants who have been so violent.

Yet, Jesus points them to a different answer. He says that God is doing a new thing. God is creating a whole new way of being in the world - a way built upon Jesus, the cornerstone.

This is the way of restorative justice rather than retribution. It is the way of mercy and peace rather than revenge. In Jesus, the old ways are being crushed and broken apart and God's new kingdom is being born. Jesus is a son who was sent into a violent vineyard, who was beaten and killed. Yet, his death did not bring down divine retribution. God did not put us all to a miserable death as punishment for killing Jesus. Instead, God responded to Jesus' death with new life, raising him from the dead. God chose to bring life rather than retribution; God chose to forgive rather than punish.

Violence and death do not have the last word. God's new life prevails. Now the risen Christ is present with us in the vineyards of our lives, our communities. Christ is present in the word, in his body and blood, to cultivate our vineyards. He asks us to examine the fruit of our lives - he challenges us, convicts us of our sin. He also brings the assurance of God's mercy, the assurance that nothing can stop God from working new life for each of us and our vineyards. God is present in Christ continuing to choose new life rather than retribution, continuing to forgive rather than punish.

With the life-giving presence of Christ, we too can get to work in our own vineyards. We can practice letting go of the things that lead to violence - letting go of indifference, impatience, resentments and easy outrage. We can practice the things that lead to peace within and without - tending to our own and others' needs, practicing patience, listening to others, forgiving. We can cultivate peace within so that we are more able to work for restorative justice and peace in our world.

We can do this work trusting that it doesn't all depend on us. The risen Christ is present and at work in our vineyards, in the vineyard of our world. And nothing, not even death, can stop God from working new life for us and for our world. As the body of Christ in the world, we get to be a part of that work-beginning in our own vineyards.

Let's take a moment of silent prayer.