

## Proper 22A 2020 Sermon

Matthew 21:33-43

*Jesus said, "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."*

Jesus tells another parable to the chief priests and elders of the people. A landowner has a vision of planting a vineyard that will yield the richest grapes, which will, in turn, produce the finest wine. He plants his vineyard, and does everything he can in order that the vineyard might produce abundantly. Then he entrusts his vineyard into the hands of stewards to care for; then he leaves for another country.

When the time comes for the harvest, the landowner sends servants to collect his produce. But his servants are beaten, stoned, and killed by the stewards of the vineyard—not once, but twice! In his frustration, the landowner sends his own son, thinking that surely the stewards will respect *him*. But the stewards, who have their **own** dreams of *keeping* the vineyard for *themselves*, **kill** the landowner's son.

Jesus intimates to the chief priests and elders that **THEY** are the unfaithful stewards, and the vineyard is the people of Israel whose care and flourishing is **their** responsibility. Jesus drives home the point of the parable, telling the chief priests and elders: "... the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom."

My friends, down through the centuries, God has *continued* to entrust his vineyard, his Kingdom, this world he has created in all its abundance and potential, to stewards like you and me, that **we** might bring forth the abundant fruits of **God's** kingdom, for God's sake.

But it seems that you and I share some of the same characteristics of those stewards in Jesus' parable. For, I think **we** often live our lives as though God has gone to another country. We do not *see* God, so God is often "out of sight, out of mind." And we begin to think that this vineyard, God's world and all its creatures, belongs to *us*; and we take actions to secure it for our own possession. Not "**Thy** kingdom come, **thy** will be done" but rather "**My** kingdom come, **my** will be done." We can even convince ourselves that we are living "righteous" lives, all the while we are laying waste to God's vineyard, God's kingdom, God's people, God's world. We **forget** that we are the *stewards*, not the *owners*, of life, creation, and the time, talent, treasure, and spirit God gives us for the period of our life on earth.

Yet, our Christian faith clearly teaches that my life is not about *me*; your life is not about *you*! Some day we will **all** have to surrender our lives back to God and be returned to the earth from which we came, "earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust," as our Prayer Book says. We are but *stewards* of our own lives, for however long a time we have on this earth. The poet and mystic William Blake said, "we are put on earth a little space, that we may learn to bear the beams of love." And I think that bearing the light-beams of God's love is what it means to faithfully tend God's vineyard as God's stewards during the short span of our life on this planet.

On the night of October 1, 2017, almost exactly three years ago today, 64-year-old Stephen Paddock opened fire upon a crowd of 22,000 attending an outdoor music festival in Las Vegas. For a seemingly interminable period of 10 full minutes, he fired more than 1,000 rounds of bullets into the crowd, killing 60 people and wounding 411, with the ensuing panic bringing the injury total to 867. It remains the deadliest mass shooting committed by an individual in modern United States history.

A TIME Magazine reporter interviewed one of the survivors, 29-year-old Doris Huser, who was at the concert with her 8-year old daughter Cordelia, her 5-year-old son Aden, and her 25-year-old developmentally disabled sister, Samantha.<sup>1</sup> At one point in the concert, her daughter needed to go to the bathroom, so Mrs. Huser left her sister and son for a moment while she took Cordelia to a port-a-potty. It was as they were returning that the shooting started, and in the panic that ensued, Doris Huser could not find her sister or 5-year-old son. While others were *fleeing* the shooting, Doris held Cordelia's hand tightly and pushed *against* the fleeing crowds toward the place where she had left Aden and Samantha. There were bodies everywhere, piles of people strewn all over. Doris and Cordelia moved from pile to pile, looking for a shoe or a shirt they recognized. All the while, bullets hit the pavement all around them.

A man, seeing that Doris was in grave danger, came up and grabbed Cordelia, threw her over his shoulder, and grabbed Doris by the belt, pulling her away to safety. The next several hours played out in a slow-motion nightmare. Doris had

no idea whether her son and sister were alive or dead. Cordelia vomited for more than hour, her tiny body convulsing with fear.

After hours of panic and dread, Doris was told that Samantha and Aidan had been found; both were safe. The next morning, Doris awoke with an overwhelming sense of gratitude – gratitude that, by some miracle, she, her children, and her sister were alive! Doris had the most *profound* sense that life is precious, and life is fragile.

Both Cordelia and Aden experienced significant symptoms of trauma in the aftermath of the shooting. For Cordelia, the problem was loud noises. If anything clapped or popped, she would burst into tears. For Aden, it was the dreadful fear of being left alone. Doris told them, “We’ve been through a war. Now is the time we have to be here for each other.”

That is but one story of one family among the 22,000 people who attended that concert in Las Vegas. Similar stories have been recounted by other survivors. In almost *every* account, survivors describe the overwhelming sense of the preciousness of life and the enormous gratitude they have for simply being able to breathe in and breathe out, to be alive on the face of this earth, God’s vineyard, being faithful stewards of whatever time, talents, treasure, and spirit God has given us to bring forth the fruit of **God’s** kingdom on earth, **not ours**. My life is not about me; your life is not about you. We are about loving God, loving our neighbor, and changing the world into the likeness of **God’s** kingdom through the power of God’s spirit working within us, through us, and among us.

My friends, over the past several months, **we** have experienced a somewhat similar trauma. It has not been 60 Americans killed and 867 injured in 10 minutes; but rather 209,000 Americans killed, and unnumbered survivors suffering lasting symptoms, over a period of 8 months. Families today have their *own* stories to tell about the war this virus has waged. On Friday, we discovered that our own President has contracted the virus; and that fact has somehow made COVID-19 seem all the more personal – at least to me.

The difference between that Las Vegas mass killing by bullets 3 years ago and the mass killing by coronavirus today is that the shooting stopped after 10 minutes; but the coronavirus *continues* to affect us, and *will* continue to affect us, for how long, only God knows.

Nonetheless, I think we could all benefit by listening, today, to those words Doris Huser spoke to her children after that *other* mass killing three years ago: “We’ve been through a war,” she said. “Now is the time we have to be here for each other.”

My friends, *we* have been through – and are still in! – a war; **and**, now is the time **we** have to be here for each other.

AMEN

<sup>1</sup> Much of the account about Doris' experience is taken directly from this article:  
<http://time.com/4968333/las-vegas-shooting-victim/>

*Prayer for President Trump*

*O God of heavenly powers, by the might of your command you drive away from our bodies all sickness and all infirmity: Be present in your goodness with your children, the President and First Lady, all in the White House or Government, and all your children around the world who have been infected by this virus, that their weakness may be banished and their strength restored; and that, their health being renewed, they may tend your vineyard with faithfulness; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

*- adapted from "For Recovery from Sickness," Book of Common Prayer, p. 458*