

Over the past few weeks we have been reading through the gospel of Matthew. We have been following the lectionary which are the scriptures assigned to each Sunday of the year. Today we continue reading from the 21<sup>st</sup> chapter.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> and 22<sup>nd</sup> chapter of Matthew Jesus tells 3 parables that are aimed at calling out the inappropriate behavior of the religious leaders. Today we will be reading the 2<sup>nd</sup> of these parables. This parable is sometimes called the “Parable of the Wicked Tenants.”

We gather in worship today with thoughts of the shooting in Las Vegas on our minds. Last weekend a gunman perched himself in a hotel room with high powered rifles in order to gun down as many people as possible. This has become, unfortunately, an all too common event in our country.

With this national tragedy on our minds we turn now to reading:

**Matthew 21:33-46.**

After the event this past weekend, country music singer Eric Church wrote a song about it. He performed earlier last weekend at the same music festival in Las Vegas. At a concert this week in Nashville, Church shared that one of the survivors planned to come to his concert with her husband.

However, her husband was one of the victims of the act of terrorism in Las Vegas. Reflecting on this couple he wrote a song. I think his words capture the feelings of many of us.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yBon53g1FTw>

Whenever we are faced with these national tragedies we want to come up with explanations that fit our already established narratives. We in the country have these narratives that someone who carries out terrorist acts must be a Muslim extremist, or a racist young white guy, or an angry black or Hispanic man seeking revenge.

The shooting this week, apparently, doesn't fit any of these narratives so we are left with people coming up with stupid conspiracy theories or bad theology.

That is why I appreciate Eric Church's song. He does not seek to explain this event with bad and simplified theology. Church simply shares the emotion that he feels.

In this scripture that we have read from Matthew, Jesus tells a parable about a man who plants a vineyard. A vineyard is a long-range project. You do not plant a vineyard and then expect a quick return on investment. You plant a vineyard and do not reap a harvest for years. To plant a vineyard takes a lot of patience and faith.

If we think about farming today it could be argued that a Christmas tree grower like Steve and Judy Penland or a dairy farmer like Bob Clinton or a cattle grower like Buster Jackson must have more faith than a row crop farmer because it takes years to see results.

In the parable that Jesus tells the farmer leases the vineyard to tenants who are responsible for overseeing the work. When harvest time comes the landowner sends his slaves to harvest the crop. But the tenants seize the slaves and beat one up, kill another, and stone a third.

The landowner needs to harvest his crop so he sends another group of slaves. This group of slaves get threatened the same way and are also beaten up. The landowner then decides to send his own son. Surely in this culture the tenants will respect the son of the owner.

But alas they do not. Upon seeing the son, the tenants say to themselves, “look, the heir, let’s beat him up and kill him and steal his inheritance.” And that is what they do.

In telling this story, Jesus asks his audience what should happen to these wicked tenants. That’s a tough question because the people listening to this story told by Jesus are the religious leaders. They respond to Jesus’ question by saying that the landowner should punish the tenants severely and give them the death penalty.

And it is at this point that Jesus shares words which many of us have heard before. “The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone.” Jesus then says point blank to the religious leaders that they are the ones who are the villains in this story. Not surprisingly, these religious leaders are not happy at all.

So how do we understand Las Vegas in light of this parable that Jesus shares? Just like in the parable, there are people in this world who are driven to do evil acts. That is what drives a man that appears to be normal but who stockpiles high powered weapons and guns down innocent concert fans.

Evil and violence have been a part of this world ever since the Bible describes in Genesis one son of Adam and Eve killing another. It can be argued that we are permitting those with evil intentions to easily gain access to some high-powered machines of destruction but that is not where I am choosing to focus today.

I am going to choose to focus on what I think Jesus focuses on in this parable. He calls out religious leaders whose actions work against God’s actions. Jesus puts himself in the role of the one who will be rejected but who will become the cornerstone for God’s work. The one rejected becomes the foundation.

So, we can focus ourselves on the evil or wicked tenants or we can focus and work for the good in the world. There will always be evil but God will always be stronger than evil.

This week some folks here are aware that on the other side of the world the Allison Creek Empowerment Program is being initiated. This is the program that is being carried out in Liberia, Africa and has been named after this church. This is the program that is being launched because of your partnership with the Christ Missionary Assembly congregation in Monrovia, Liberia.

This week the Allison Creek Empowerment program is being launched to help people in Liberia learn the skills to cook, work with computers, sew clothes, do hair, and many other skills. The 10 sewing machines were purchased through the donations of the Bowling Green Presbyterian Church because they were inspired by what you in this church are doing.

I heard yesterday that the treasurer of that church who happens to be the Chief Financial Officer for the Clover School District wants to explore how we can create a market here in York County for the products that they will be making in Liberia.

Who knows where this leads? In this parable that Jesus shares the product is good but the delivery system is malfunctioning. Who knows? God may be working through you and others here in York County to create a business model where we are involved in helping the people of Liberia create self-sustaining businesses and ministry of empowerment.

It's fair to ask "why" whenever tragedy happens. There is evil in this world. Jesus tells a story where innocent servants and then the son of the landowner are killed. But the vine grower is not a short sale opportunist. The vine grower is a long-term investor.

So, if we want to be part of what the vine grower is all about and, therefore, what God is all about, then we will put ourselves to work doing the good that this world needs.

God is the Creator and we are all just tenants. And yes, there are wicked tenants.

There are wicked acts in the world.

But we are called to be the good in all that we do. AMEN.

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-Given: October 8, 2017 in Allison Creek Presbyterian (York, SC)