

Sermon – 18th Pentecost
Matthew 21:33-46 & Isaiah 5:1-7
October 8, 2017
“The 1st Theses & the 2nd Amendment”

The news from Las Vegas on our minds somebody at our Wednesday men’s breakfast said “*pastor, what can we do about this?*” At 7:10 AM and barely half a cup of coffee in me I wasn’t all that ready to give a reflective answer. I’d listened the previous night to a TV news anchor ask a pastor what he would say to victim’s families, and he said “*I’d remind them that the sufferings of this world do not compare to the glory about to be revealed to us*” and to a follow up question said “*it’s the darkest moments in life that the love of God shines brightest.*” I hate to say this but I was glad a TV talking head cut a conversation with a Christian pastor short.

Except I don’t think I offered up anything better the next morning. Las Vegas is just the latest “unspeakably evil” act our nation has to contend with. The sorrow of victim’s families and the bewilderment of the murderer’s has been punctuated by valiant but inadequate statements from civic leaders about how Las Vegas will not be defined by this violence and “*we’ll be stronger one day*” and so on. None of us can imagine how awful this. “*What can we do about this?*” Doing nothing simply won’t do. That sweeps the urgent problem of mass murder under the rug again and forces us to say on the one hand “*this sort of thing can’t be prevented*” when on the other we know “*this sort of thing*” happens in our country more often than most.

Moreover “nothing” won’t do because of our text today from Matthew, which calls the church to “*produce some fruits of the kingdom for the King.*” The murders in Las Vegas are a civil problem, but ultimately a human problem. The church can’t take a pass on being part of the solution. One takeaway from the parable of the “*vineyard owner and wicked tenants*” is that Israel had not lived into its giftedness and task. Israel, planted in the commands and promises of Mount Sinai could have been a great nation but became one who often equivocated on moral questions.

But this is no time for finger wagging. Because the same privilege and task given Israel now belongs to the church. So we can’t just say evil is too pervasive and moral issues too complex. Israel lived under the law but the church enjoys the very presence of the lawgiver Jesus Christ. Matthew 1:23 says, of the child born to Mary “*he will be called “Emmanuel” which means “God with us.”*” In Matthew 28:20 Jesus tells his followers “*remember I am with you always, to the end of the age.*” So then we among whom Jesus lives, “*what can we do about this?*” Dorothy Sayers, an English novelist of the early 20th century wrote, in the aftermath of World War II “*the people most discouraged (were) those who cling to an optimistic belief in the civilizing influence of progress and enlightenment. (War) utterly negated everything they believed.*” But she added anyone who understood Judeo-Christian beliefs about original sin were prepared to cope - sinners acting like sinners were no crushing blow. Coping is good.

But our text from Matthew says God is looking for more than coping. We've got to remember Jesus is with us and therefore one mass shooting after another does not have to litter the fruit basket we offer from our allotted time in the vineyard. Our hope is good news that begins with Jesus saying "*repent – change your thinking.*" In the very first "thesis" of his famous "95 Theses", the ones that have us celebrating the 500th anniversary of the Reformation this month, Martin Luther wrote "*Our Lord and Master Jesus Christ, when he said "repent" willed that the whole life of believers should be repentance.*" Luther went on to teach how the law of God works. The first is that it keeps order in the world by restraining unrepentant sinners. The second is it brings good news of forgiveness to sinners by bringing them to Christ – through repentance.

Jesus, in Matthew 7:12 said the first part of the law is fulfilled whenever "*we do unto others as we would have them do unto us.*" The law does no harm but seeks our welfare. *What can we do about things like Las Vegas?* Well, as a nation we can repent. The political left and right could admit complicity in letting a culture of death grow as we fight constitutional fights. So we can cheer efforts to find common ground so that guns that fire hundreds of rounds per second are all but impossible to land in the hands of troubled people. And even if we disagree on how our Constitution's 2nd Amendment should be interpreted, we can agree that law exists to protect. That calls for change in our thinking, to repentance, to Luther's 1st Thesis and ultimately to Matthew and a trust in the stone that crushes our wills so we can find life in the will of God.

And this is risky. Christians who believe the 2nd Amendment was given to allow for self-defense are correct. But Christians must also remember God has commanded us to defend our neighbor. Lutherans confess government is not a threat to good behavior rather bad, so we confess that government must be given the prerogative to restrain the bad. Admitting that the right to keep and bear arms has become an entrenched argument, we must continually ask ourselves "*have my views become too entrenched.*" The same by the way can be said of people who believe the constitution guarantees the right to an abortion. Paradoxically, studies show a lot of folks who support abortion rights would prefer to see gun rights reigned in, and vice versa. Both sides might be well served to ponder that in heaven's eyes, the loss of life is the loss of life – a child killed in her school or in a clinic are all God's children, who mourns the death of them all. Debating moral issues comes with risk – opponents may politically crucify us. Can we repent of this thinking even a bit? We can only pray.

And in praying remember the Crucified Lord Jesus, who told us that the kingdom belongs to the peacemakers and the humble of heart. This is the hopeful side of our lesson today. There is something we can do in the wake of terrible events like this past Sunday. We can remember that while we were still sinners, Jesus was crushed for us. Confident of that mercy, we can extend mercy to those crushed from the world's bondage to sin, pray for them, and seek their welfare earnestly. For to such saints belongs the Kingdom of God - always. AMEN

