

Words of Comfort, Call to Action

Community Presbyterian Church

October 8, 2017

Matthew 21:33-46

***<sup>33</sup> “Listen to another parable. There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a winepress in it, and built a watchtower. Then he leased it to tenants and went to another country. <sup>34</sup> When the harvest time had come, he sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his produce. <sup>35</sup> But the tenants seized his slaves and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. <sup>36</sup> Again he sent other slaves, more than the first; and they treated them the same way. <sup>37</sup> Finally he sent his son to them, saying, “They will respect my son.” <sup>38</sup> But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, “This is the heir; come let us kill him and get his inheritance.” <sup>39</sup> So they seized him, threw him out of the***

*vineyard, and killed him. <sup>40</sup> Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants? <sup>41</sup>*

*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 harvest time.”*

*<sup>42</sup> 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”? <sup>43</sup> Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces fruit of the kingdom. <sup>44</sup> The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone in whom it falls.” <sup>45</sup> When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they realized he was speaking about them. <sup>46</sup> They wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowds, because they regarded him as a prophet.*

I woke up Monday morning to the news of the horrific events in Las Vegas; 59 dead and 500 wounded in the worst mass shooting in modern US history. An evening of relaxation and fun was, in an instant, turned into a night of horror and tragedy. 59 people will never go home again, and those injured, along with the police, firefighters, paramedics, nurses and doctors, and the countless others affected by the act of one person, will never be the same. I know you join with me and others around the world in offering our thoughts and prayers for all affected by these events.

I had written a sermon, focusing on the first part of the Matthew passage, but in light of the events in Las Vegas, God has placed a different sermon on my heart today.

I want to first turn to Scripture to offer all of us some words of comfort. John 16:33 tells us, ***"I have told you***

***these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world, you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.***” And from Psalm 34:18, ***“The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit.”*** I’m sure each of us have our favorite passages of scripture we turn to when trouble strikes, and I encourage each of you to re-read those go-to passages in the days and weeks ahead, as we come to grips with a tragedy that never should have happened.

I had a meeting with a member of the new worshiping community leadership team Monday afternoon, and the first thing this person asked me was could we pray for the situation in Las Vegas. You see, as Christians our first response to events, tragic or not, should be prayer.

Prayers of gratitude for joyful, happy events and prayers for help and comfort in times of sorrow and pain. So, I was delighted to take a moment to pray with this fellow

believer as we both struggled to make sense out of what was happening.

After praying, our conversation turned to what, if anything, could be done to prevent a repeat of Sunday night and because I'm a firm believer that faith without works is dead, I had some ideas.

But first, let me take a moment to tell you what this sermon is not about. This is not a sermon about the evils of guns. Having spent many summers, as a child on my family's ranch in north eastern Montana, I'm very familiar with guns. It was my mother who taught me how to shoot and it was both my parents who taught me what responsible gun ownership looks like. I'm partnered with a man who is a former police officer, my sister is married to a county sheriff in Southern Idaho, and I have several nieces and nephews who serve in the

military. So, this is not a gun control sermon, per se. The goal here is to address the larger issue of how we, as followers of Christ, respond to acts of violence in our midst.

In vs. 42 of our Gospel reading, we hear this: <sup>42</sup> ***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”?***

Since all parables are allegorical; that is, stories meant to convey a deeper spiritual meaning that transcends the literal sense of a sacred text, we find ourselves needing to look beyond the surface meaning of Jesus’s words. The most common understanding of this portion of the story is that Jesus is referring to himself as the rejected stone who is ultimately made into the cornerstone. Yes,

Jesus is the cornerstone of our faith, the solid rock upon which God has built God's church and the rock upon which we stand. There can be no doubt that this interpretation is a valid and important one.

However, I'd like to propose a different interpretation. What if the stone that's been rejected is the voice of the Holy Spirit? Think about that for a moment.

We know that the Holy Spirit descended on Jesus at the time of his baptism and we know that God sent the Holy Spirit to the disciples at Pentecost. We know the Holy Spirit stands as part of the Trinity; part of the cornerstone of what it means to be Christian, so is it too much of a leap to envision the Holy Spirit as the rejected stone? What are the implications for us if we accept this interpretation?

God speaks to us, individually and corporately, through that still small voice of the Holy Spirit. It is God speaking to us when the cry to end violence pierces our hearts. It is God speaking to us when the cry to end hatred and discrimination pricks our conscience.

What if, in the midst of a national tragedy, God is speaking to us now? What if God, speaking through the voice of the Holy Spirit, is calling us to look at the way firearms are dealt with in this country? What if, by ignoring that still small voice, we too are rejecting the stone?

I believe, as Christians, we are called to respond to any form of violence, hatred and discrimination in the following ways:

1. Prayer. Praying should always be our first response to violence, hatred and discrimination.

We must pray for the victims, and we must also pray for the perpetrators, as hard as that may be.

2. Listen. Since God speaks to us through the Holy Spirit, we need to listen to what God has to say in any situation.

3. Act. Praying and listening are simply not enough. Offering thoughts and prayers, while ignoring God's call to action, is a vain and empty gesture designed to make ourselves feel good about ignoring realities we may not want to face. We must take what we hear from God and act on it. God's voice will guide us, but change won't happen without action on our part.

Your charge then, good people, is to pray, listen and act. If, in the face of tragedy, you feel compelled to act that is God telling you to act. If, in the face of hatred or discrimination, you feel compelled to speak out for those

who are hated and discriminated against, that is God telling you to act. So, pray, listen and then act. God will guide your words and your feet, but prayers and thoughts without action is the same as faith without works: dead. In closing, I want to quote the words of one of my favorite hymns:

**O Day of Peace that dimly shines, though all our hopes and dreams and prayers, guide us to justice, truth and love, delivered from our selfish schemes. May swords of hate fall from our hands, our hearts from envy find release, 'till by God's grace our warring world shall see  
Christ's reign of peace.**

May God's voice lead us into action to make that day of peace a reality sooner rather than later. **AMEN.**