

“How Does Jesus Respond to Violence?”
A Sermon for Every Sunday, Pentecost 18A
Matthew 21:33-46

“How should we react to such violence?”

A member of our pilgrimage group asked that question as they got onto the bus. Our pilgrimage group had just spent the morning at Melk Abbey, one of the most beautiful monasteries in the world. It is a baroque masterpiece, located on the Danube River between Salzburg and Vienna. The beauty is so overwhelming that you can hardly take it all in.

As we got on the bus, I made the mistake of looking at my phone, and I saw a headline from back home in the United States. It was a headline about the violence which happened at an outdoor concert in Las Vegas in 2017. A man in a hotel room. A crowd at a concert. A total of 59 people lost their lives.

As I sat on the bus, the contrast was jarring. We had just spent hours surrounded by some of the most beautiful things human hands have ever made – now we confronted the horror that human hands can unleash. And someone asked, “How should we react to such violence?”

After an awkward silence, someone else said, “We have to pay attention to how Jesus responds to violence.” The bus got even more quiet.

As we drove on, I was feeling overwhelmed by the violence which human hands can unleash. I thought about 1995, when some guys used farm fertilizer to blow up the federal office building in Oklahoma City. Or 2001, when a couple of guys took flight lessons, and they used planes to attack us on September 11. In July of 2016 in France, a terrorist rented a truck and killed 86 people. In Las Vegas, guns were the weapon of choice. Recently, in London, it was a knife attack. And on the streets of our own cities, violence is an almost nightly occurrence.

It’s overwhelming, isn’t it? When someone is intent on mayhem, it seems they find a way to make it happen: whether it’s a gun, or farming supplies, a kitchen knife or a rented vehicle. Hatred in the heart always finds a tool. And that can be overwhelming to think about.

But I kept coming back to the statement on the bus: “We have to pay attention to how JESUS responds to violence.” And, today’s Gospel passage shows an interesting answer to that question.

In today’s parable, Jesus is clearly drawing on the imagery provided by Isaiah another of today’s

lectionary readings. In both Isaiah and Matthew, God the Father is portrayed as a landowner who sets up a vineyard. (Isn't it nice that we have a God who likes wine?) He generously supplies all that is necessary for the vineyard to produce a good harvest.

But in both passages, something goes terribly wrong. The harvest is not a good one. As Isaiah says, God looks for a harvest of justice and righteousness, but instead there is a harvest of bloodshed and outcries of suffering.

In the Gospel parable, the owner's messengers are violently mistreated and killed. And even when the master sends his SON to collect the harvest, the Son is killed, too.

Within the context of Matthew's Gospel, this parable could be read as a prophetic statement about what is going to happen to Jesus himself very soon. God sent prophets to his people, but the people rejected them and killed them. Then God sends his SON to the world, but on the cross the Son will be killed. Jesus himself will be the victim of violence.

So, Jesus tells a parable in which violence seems to have the last word. But then he asks a demanding question. He asks: "What will the owner of the vineyard do to the wicked ones who killed his servants and his son?"

In other words: *What will the owner of the vineyard do in response to violence?*

Pay careful attention: it is the *people listening to Jesus* who say, "The owner will kill all those violent people." Jesus's *listeners* are the ones who suggest that the proper response to violence is... more violence.

But Jesus' response to violence is different than the response suggested by his listeners.

How does *Jesus* respond to the violence in the parable? He doesn't suggest more killing. Rather, he quotes Psalm 118, about the 'stone which is rejected and then becomes the cornerstone.'

Ancient Christians believed that this Psalm found its fulfilment in Jesus' death and resurrection. Jesus was the one who was violently *rejected*. But Jesus does not respond to violence – or the threat of violence – with more violence. He always does God's will, even if that requires heroic humility, a flood of forgiveness, a trust that our God is more powerful than death.

Again and again in the Scriptures, Jesus makes it clear that every human act has consequences, both now, and in eternity. According to Jesus, the violent will bear the weight of their actions.

But for me, the key insight in today's Gospel is this: it was the *crowd* who said that the answer to

violence is more violence. Jesus offers a different way.

If we pull back the lens, we see a bigger picture here. Today's passage takes place in Matthew's Gospel AFTER the events of what we call Palm Sunday. Jesus has entered Jerusalem, and been hailed as the savior. This makes the religious and political leaders nervous... so nervous that they plot to kill him, and soon. The threat of violence is palpable. Death is on the horizon. And from the moment Jesus enters Jerusalem, he is showing us how HE chooses to respond to the violence that is afoot.

How? Well, after entering Jerusalem, he goes into the Temple and he knocks over the tables of the money changers. To which you might say, "See? Jesus responds to violence with violence!"

Not quite. The leaders are plotting to kill Jesus. But when he knocks over the tables, he doesn't kill anyone. In fact, he doesn't injure anyone. In order for ordinary people to offer sacrifice in the temple, they had to exchange their Roman money for temple coins – and when they did so, the exchange rate was terrible, and ordinary people of modest means had to pay so much more out of pocket just to fulfill their religious duties.

So when he overturns these money changing tables, Jesus is overturning the tools of injustice, knocking over the corrupt system which kept the Poor *poor* in ancient Israel. Jesus responds to the violence that's afoot by... *working for justice*.

What else does Jesus do, even as his violent death approaches? Matthew tells us that after Jesus knocked over the money tables, the blind and lame came to Jesus in the temple, and he healed them. Why is that important? Because, for *centuries*, the blind and lame were forbidden to offer sacrifice in the Temple. They were told they were not worthy. So Jesus responds to violence by... welcoming the outcast and healing the wounded.

What else does he do? He starts teaching the crowd with challenging parables. He tells people truths they don't want to hear. He requires people to deal honestly with the ramifications of their actions! He does not sugar coat God's Word, and he tells people that those who are disobedient to God's Word will find that disobedience has consequences, now and forever.

After the son has been killed in the parable, Jesus asks, "What will the master do to those violent people?" The crowd made a mistake – the crowd thought that the best response to violence is always more violence. Do *we* make that mistake?

But how does *Jesus* respond to violence, or the threat of violence? He responds with concrete actions *for justice*, actions to overturn abuses which trap people in poverty. Jesus responds with welcoming, and the healing of human hurts. He responds with truth-telling, a call to honesty and

integrity, a comprehension of what happens to people who are disobedient to God.

Just watch the news this week, and you will see. You will see that every baptized believer is born into a world where brokenness still exists, where tears are real, where injustice is passed on from one generation to the next, where violence happens with sad predictability. Historians would point out that *every* generation of children has been born into a world of brokenness and tears.

But we are not just born in and baptized into brokenness. We are baptized into the kingdom of God, and become members of God's holy people today. Because of that, we can be taught to recognize God in all things, to turn to God in every situation, and to always, always, always follow the example of Jesus.

How does Jesus respond to violence? That's how we should respond!

How does Jesus live? That's how all the baptized should live!

Where is Jesus? Right here. Right now.

In every child. At every table. In the living word, and the breaking of the bread.

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