

October 8, 2017
Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost: Proper 22, Year A, RCL
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St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, CT

Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20
Psalm 19
Philippians 3:4b-14
Matthew 21:33-46

Over the summer, I visited Concord, Massachusetts. In an antique shop in the village, I found a basket filled with paper filled with 19th-century handwriting. They were sermons, written by an unidentified minister to an unidentified congregation. At the top of each was a scripture reference and at least one date—apparently that preacher recycled his sermons. But one was different. On it was written, “Presidents [*sic*] death.”

Here are some excerpts from that sermon:

I feel this morning, my friends, that a deep shade is cast over us, which serves to make darker the clouds which obscure the sun of our day.

You and I have shed the tear of regret and uttered the voice of sincere condolence to the pent up grief in the bosoms of those we love and [with] who[se] misfortunes we would gladly commiserate.

O, it makes us more brother and sister, more deeply to realize how strongly we are bound together in the arms of destiny, and our affections connected by the purity of love.

But now, my friends, the hills are blackened from extreme to extreme. The Milky Way is turned to Egyptian night. The sun of our nation's brightness almost seems to have set. The hope of our nation's peace is obscured.

Just as the whole people were elated with joy, their hearts strung to the greatest tension—*just now*—the electric spark flashes its lightnings through every fiber of our country's being and brings to every dwelling the unwelcome intelligence that the assassin's hand has deprived us of our chosen Chief and his chosen Councilor.

Just now—but yestermorn—it is announced that the President's dead! Abraham Lincoln is no more.¹

I have been thinking about that old sermon a lot this week. Today is supposed to be our annual talking-about-money Sunday. Unfortunately, last week's shooting of 58 concertgoers in Las Vegas necessitated a talking-about-guns Sunday. Like most ministers, I quite dislike talking about money. But I would much rather talk about money than talk about yet another shooting. Of course, in this country, talking about shooting *is* talking about money—not money in the church, but money in Congress from the National Rifle Association.

My preaching colleagues and I have to do this way too often. I've been in ordained parish ministry for eleven years. In my first *seven months*, twice I had to preach about horrific events involving guns. The first was a local domestic violence case. The perpetrator, unable to locate his girlfriend, instead killed her mother and a work colleague. He is serving a life sentence without parole. The second was the mass shooting at Virginia Tech. The perpetrator, a student, killed 32 students and teachers before killing himself.

It may very well be that “guns don't kill people, people kill people.” But for those who kill, guns are the weapon of choice. Mass shootings get the biggest news coverage. I suppose that's because their scale and randomness make them acutely disturbing, both mentally and spiritually. But the fact is, mass shooting are just the crimson tip of the gun violence iceberg. For example, a graphic in *The New York Times* on Friday showed that it took the city of Chicago only 28 days to compile its most recent 58 gun deaths; it took Baltimore only 68 days.² I should also mention that October happens to be domestic violence awareness month. In the United States, about 100 women per month are killed by intimate partners. About half of them are killed with guns.³

Most church-goers report never having heard a word about domestic violence from the pulpit. Therefore, though this sermon isn't exactly about domestic violence, I want to say a little more about it. Domestic violence is widely prevalent and crosses all demographic boundaries. The danger to the victim is substantially higher when there is a gun in the home. Factors such as a lack of financial resources often make it difficult to leave. The victim is most at risk when trying to leave.

The church has a poor history when it comes to domestic and sexual violence. Far too many of its ministers put marriage vows above personal safety. This church will not—I will not—say that a person is obliged to stay with a violent partner. If you are experiencing domestic violence, I urge you to get help. If you know someone who is experiencing domestic violence, I urge you to urge them to get help. The situation is unlikely to get better on its own. There are resources available.

Let's take a look at today's reading from Matthew. This will be the second time in three weeks that we have had a Gospel reading containing a violent parable. I'll again remind you that a parable is a hyperbolic story used to make a point. Matthew's community lived in a violent culture; they would have understood violent parables. Considering today's parable, we can skim the surface and glean this point: don't cheat others, or else. But the scale of the illustration is so exaggerated, it must be saying more. The final sentence infers that the parable is a jab at the structural corruption of the religious leaders of the day. The church must clean its own house, or else. I think—I hope—that the church is getting ever better at that.

Still, there is another, perhaps even more disturbing, aspect of this parable. In this parable, the victim of violence becomes the perpetrator of violence. That leads to some uncomfortable questions. Is *God* the authority figure who shifts from victim to perpetrator? Is *God* capable of violence?

I say *no*. In saying no, I part ways with many Christians, a fact with which I am content. As I see it, God never is and never can be the perpetrator of violence. At the same time, I take the parable seriously. And what I hear it saying unequivocally is this: violence begets violence. To put it another way, “paybacks are hell.” We don’t need God for those paybacks; we humans seem to manage just fine on our own.

Now, here’s the thing: if we say “paybacks are hell,” we might also say “paybacks are heaven.” To put a more theological wrapping on that, one might say that God gave humans free will, and their choices have consequences. To some degree, humans live in the hell—or the heaven—of their own creation. Every person has choices about how they will respond to the events around them. In turn, a person’s actions can and do affect the world and their experience of the world. If violence begets violence, then peace begets peace. With God’s grace, we can choose to carry nourishment rather than weapons, to help make peace rather than violence, to help create heaven rather than hell.

There is only one possible response to the most horrendous acts of violence, and that is to proclaim the brilliant Gospel of love. I don’t mean proclaiming it only with thoughts and prayers. I mean proclaiming it with action. And so it turns out that this sermon is about stewardship—**STEWARDSHIP** writ large—which is really all about love.

And so I want to return, very carefully, to the subject of stewardship. For a few moments, let’s pretend this is a regular stewardship sermon. In a regular stewardship sermon I would cover the following points: our church is self-supporting and your generosity keeps the doors open; even so, we pay more than half of our expenses with endowment funds; for many years we have exceeded the recommended endowment draw; while we’re in no immediate trouble, we need to stop overdrawing. I would also ask you to pledge a commitment for 2018 of your time, talent, and fortune, and to fulfill your monetary pledge through automatic payments.

When we learn about stewardship campaigns, the experts tell us to focus on the spirituality of giving. The idea is that God has blessed us with abundance; from that abundance, we give back to God some of what God has given us; included in that is giving to the church. To be honest, I am personally not highly persuaded by that approach. But I do agree that stewardship is a spiritual issue. And I can only truly realize that when I understand stewardship as not being limited to the expanse of space and humanity contained by the walls around us.

And so, even as I hope you reach in at St. Thomas’s, I also hope you reach out as far as you can. “Stewardship” is about so much more than any one location or subject. Events since the November elections have made that crystal clear for me. Each of us must choose to take or to give, to deplete or to steward. We do talk about contributing to this your church so that it can remain your church. But I think the point is ultimately to contribute to this your world so that it can remain your world.

It occurs to me that the social justice issues of our day are actually all issues of violence. That’s because social justice issues are related to safety and security—safety and security that is not only physical, but also mental and spiritual. It’s about guns, *and* it’s about a whole lot more. If a person must sleep on the street, violence is visited upon their body. If a person is denied a vote, violence is visited upon their mind. As these events accrue, violence is visited upon the spirit.

The old sermon I started with reminds me of the tender connections that bind us together—with one another and with all parts of creation, past, present, and future. It reminds me that violence will not have the last word. Jesus talked about violence, but I don't believe he wanted it to propagate, not even under the hand of God. I feel certain that his goal was to interrupt it. We can be interrupters.

Do you want a world in which children are fed? In which immigrants live without fear? In which sick people receive health care? In which all people are safe from violence of any kind?

When you think about stewardship this year, think about all those things, and more. You can't do it all, but you can do something. Think about all you have experienced and how you became who you are. Decide what's important to you. Dream big. And then, use your time, talent, and treasure to help make your dream a reality. With God's grace, paybacks are heaven.

Notes

¹ From the sermon described.

² Larry Buchanan, Troy Griggs, Jasmine C. Lee, and Karen Yourish, "Comparing the Las Vegas Attack With Daily Gun Deaths in U.S. Cities," *The New York Times*, October 6, 2017, available at https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/10/06/us/las-vegas-gun-deaths.html?_r=0 (accessed October 7, 2017).

³ "Gun Violence by the Numbers," Everytown, available online at <https://everytownresearch.org/gun-violence-by-the-numbers/> (accessed October 7, 2017).