

Pentecost 17, Year A, Proper 22
100514
All Saints Episcopal Church

In the name of the One who creates, who saves and who makes us holy. Amen.

"Here's another story," Jesus says.

There are lots of stories that Jesus tells during the course of his ministry and in this long season of Sundays after Pentecost we have heard a lot of them. Many of the stories begin with, "The kingdom of God is like..." but today's story does not. To put this story in context, we need to know that at the beginning of this chapter, Jesus is nearing the end of his ministry. He has just ridden into Jerusalem on a donkey, surrounded by a crowd putting their coats on the ground for him to ride on and waving palm branches in the air. Some are chanting, "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!" Others are not so happy to have him there. The whole city is in turmoil.

The first thing Jesus does after his arrival is to go into the Temple, throw out everyone who has set up shop, buying and selling, and kick over the tables of the loan sharks. "This is supposed to be a house of prayer," he says. "You have made it a hangout for thieves!" And he leaves town after that to spend the night in safety in nearby Bethany.

The next day, Jesus is on his way back to Jerusalem. He is hungry. He spots a fig tree on the side of the road, and thinks he's found a good breakfast. But when he gets to the tree, it turns out there is no fruit on it at all. So he zaps it! A very un-Jesus-like response it seems to me! The tree withers on the spot and becomes a useless, dry stick. Jesus says, "No more figs from this tree - ever!"

I'm going to guess that Jesus is feeling the tension of the week to come. Time is not on his side and he has to be as blunt as possible if he is going to get his message across.

Then he goes back to the Temple to teach and the high priests and other leaders start to question him about his credentials for preaching there, about where he

gets the authority to do what he is doing. Jesus brings them up short in their questioning and the result is that they become even angrier with him.

Then he tells the story we heard last week about the 2 sons whose father asked them to work in the vineyard one day. One says 'Yes,' but doesn't go, and the other says 'No,' but later changes his mind and does go.

Then he says, 'Here's another story:' a wealthy farmer who has planted a vineyard, fenced it in, built a winepress and a watchtower has hired farmhands to tend to his vineyards. When it's time to harvest the grapes, he sends servants to collect his profits from the farmhands. The farmhands beat up and kill the servants. The farmer sends some more, and the same thing happens. At the end of his rope, he sends his son, thinking, "surely they will respect my son." (What was he thinking?) But when he arrives, the farmhands rub their hands together with greed. "Let's kill him, too. Then we'll have it all for ourselves." So that's what they did. And that is the end of the story.

Jesus then asks his listeners, 'So what do you think will happen when the farmer gets here?' And they answered, 'He'll kill them - a rotten bunch, and good riddance. Then he'll get some farmhands who will do the right thing and give him the profits.'

Jesus says to them, "Don't you read your Bibles? Haven't you read there that *'the stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone?'* This is what will happen: God's kingdom will be taken back from you and handed over to a people who will live out a kingdom life - that is, who will produce the fruits of the kingdom.

Fruits of the kingdom. Those fruits are mercy, justice, compassion, dignity and well-being for all.

Now I'm sure you've heard those words or similar ones before. We preach them all the time, because that is what Jesus preached. They are the Good News of the Gospel. They are the foundation of our Baptismal Covenant. Without those qualities, we are nothing but a bunch of wild animals.

But there is another part of today's story that I want to focus on. It's the response the crowd gave Jesus when he asked what they thought would happen to the farmhands when the owner showed up. They said, "He will put those wretches to a miserable death."

It strikes me that in addition to the 'traditional' fruits about which Jesus speaks so often, another one of the fruits of kingdom life is freedom from violence, the promise of safety and peace for all. It is shalom. When Jesus says to the chief priests and Pharisees that God's kingdom will be taken back from them and given to people who will live the kingdom life, he is talking about living peacefully just as much as he is talking about living with justice and compassion. I think those things cannot and should not be separated.

In today's story, answering the violence of the farmhands with more violence (a miserable death for a rotten bunch) does no good at all. In fact, if they are killed, the farmhands win. Sure, they will be dead, but they also will have gotten the farmer to play their game and nothing good will have been accomplished.

Unfortunately, I think we have not learned anything from this parable and nothing has changed much over time, except for an escalated scale of the violence in our world. There have been very few years in recorded history in which there have not been any wars somewhere on the planet. In fairly recent times, the 'War to End all Wars' obviously did not live up to its billing. Wars, genocide, fighting between tribes, ethnic groups, and neighbors, 'domestic disputes' - senseless, all of it - passed down from one generation to the next. Children learning from their parents, growing up to pass it on to their children.

What is even more alarming, I think, is how we use violence in our conversations, how we approve of the use of violence by other people (as long as we approve of why they're doing it), how we encourage violence. Think, for instance, of school fights, or fights anywhere else, where people gather around to cheer and encourage the ones who are fighting, recording everything on their cell phones for posterity. Or how about the little girl who was learning how to fire an automatic weapon and accidentally shot and killed her instructor? Why in the world does a child NEED to learn to fire automatic weapons? Not to mention the question of the availability and acceptability of automatic weapons practically everywhere in our country.

Domestic violence is an epidemic affecting individuals in every community, regardless of age, economic status, sexual orientation, gender, race, religion or nationality. On a typical day, there are more than 20,000 phone calls placed to domestic violence hotlines nationwide. We should be much more worried about dying from gun violence or domestic violence than from the Ebola virus! Yet we talk

about arresting someone who *MIGHT* have been infected with it, but we don't do anything about stopping the epidemic of violence.

Is this really the way we want to live our lives - with women afraid when men refuse to believe that 'no' means 'no'; with people of color afraid to walk the streets because it seems to be ok for armed white men to kill them; and perhaps with white men afraid to object to this madness for fear of being ridiculed or worse? Is this the kingdom way of life? Can we stop this culture of violence? Will we ever realize the dream of a life of shalom?

It will not be easy. But we cannot continue the way things are. And we cannot NOT do something about it. So while we are promising to treat people with respect and dignity, and promising to work for justice with compassion, let's remember that those things are not possible if violence is in the midst of us. The fruits of kingdom life are a package deal: justice, kindness, mercy, compassion, enough to eat, a place to sleep, respect, dignity, AND freedom from fear, AND safety. Shalom.

How does it happen? This is when we should ask what would Jesus do.

Answer violence with love, not revenge. Love our enemies. Love our neighbors. Love ourselves. Turn the other cheek. Encourage others in the way of peace. And may God bless us all with enough foolishness to believe that we can make a difference in this world, so that we can do what others claim cannot be done. AMEN.