



ST BART'S

A Sermon by
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What is to be Done?

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, October 8, 2017
The Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Based on Matthew 21:33-46*

“When Jesus acts out God’s love, we see that it is able to withstand not being heard, being resisted, being attacked. And in all that, God does not reflect our vengeance back at us.”

At noon on Tuesday, St. Bart’s tolled our bell once for every person who was murdered in Las Vegas this week. The magnitude of that night, the compounded grief and horror that come with another wave of death and violence, the scale and scope of the loss, the tear in history: it sickens the heart, it confounds speech. In this bleak season, our community is seeking how to bind our thoughts and prayers with our action, action that matters. This is at least the fourth time I have stood before you from this pulpit after a mass murder like this, and I feel a kind of dread that comes with suspecting that we have found ourselves in a new normal for our nation. And yet I refuse to stay in that place. I refuse to lose faith in God’s power to lift us up out of the pit that we have dug for ourselves. And I refuse to see our society as a lost cause. In the midst of a polarized, politicized, confused, and heartbroken people, I refuse to stop listening for what God longs for us to be, and where my life can meet the needs of this broken world. In this mess, I keep asking God what I should do.

What I should say, though? Now that is fraught. Because that relies on someone else listening, doesn’t it? That relies on people having ears to hear, as Jesus said. And, as Jesus discovered, that was rarely the case.

A few years ago at the University of Southern California’s “Brain and Creativity Institute,” a study was conducted where people were placed into one of those MRI machines. Once inside, they were presented with counterarguments to strongly held political beliefs. Statements about gay marriage, climate change, and gun control, for example. As participants were read these counterarguments, their brains were scanned for activity. What they saw was that the same part of the brain that responds to a physical threat responds to an intellectual one. It’s the amygdala, in the emotional core of your mind. Unfortunately, it makes us biologically wired to react to threatening information the same way we’d react to being attacked by a predator. And this fight or flight reaction when presented with evidence counter to our beliefs can lead to our digging in deeper and believe more strongly in our argument. In the world of neuroscience, they call it the “backfire effect,” where the presentation of facts actually leads to the losing of an argument, to losing hearts and minds.

I think about this “backfire effect” when I remember how so many prophets and saints and proclaimers of justice were treated when they spoke the truth of things. I think about this when I observe the ever-increasing polarization of our society. I think about it when I come before you to preach on topics that can be divisive.

And I think about this effect when I read the parable for today, one that has Jesus imagining a people who refuse to listen and, indeed, who react violently when efforts are made to reach out and be heard. And yet those efforts to be heard continue. They persist. The violence escalates, even at the expense of what is most dear. And the question that Jesus closes with is so powerful: in all this mess, “What is to be done?”

The parable is so striking that I think it is worth telling again. but instead of in a vineyard, how about a more contemporary and local setting?

There once was a real estate developer. And he built a tower, a stylish residential tower right by the Park. It was built head and shoulders above all other neighbors. In fact, it scraped the heavens with its sleek lines and pale marble spire. There was a deep parking garage that was dug beneath it. And there was a high fence around the tower, with a garden courtyard that you could see through the rails. There were watchmen for the gate and doormen for the tower, all with smart, brushed uniforms. When the developer opened the building for leasing, all of the apartments, including the low-income portion, were snapped up immediately. Full, in a month. The developer then moved to London. But the next month, when the rent was due, the tenants created an association, and as a block, they chose not to pay the rent. Agents from the developer came to collect the rent. One was locked out of the courtyard. Another was attacked by a few of the tenants as he left his car. One agent found his way into the property and was never seen again. Another month of no payment. The developer sent another rent collector. The stronger members killed him in the courtyard. Finally, three months into the crisis, the developer sent his son to the tower, saying to himself, "Surely, they will respect my son." But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, "This is the heir: come let us kill him and get his inheritance, this tower!" So the renters' association seized the son, threw him out of the courtyard, and killed him on the sidewalk. Now when the developer of the tower returns, what will he do to those tenants?

This is where Jesus leaves his listeners. In all this mess, what is to be done? What will be done?

Now, the listeners were sharp. They knew that Jesus was talking in a symbolic riddle that had something to say about their lives. It could be that the tenants represent the Jewish people resisting the rule of the landowners, the Romans. It could be that the tenants represent the human soul resisting the call of God to repent. Or, it could be that the tenants are the current administration of God's Temple in Jerusalem, resisting the troublesome prophets and Jesus' demands that they quit their abuses and repent. This is what the chief priests and Pharisees suspected.

So Jesus asks the crowd, "In all this mess, what will be done?" The most popular answer is the logic of the lynch mob: "They will be put to a miserable death!" But this is if you are on the side of the landowner. What if, if your imagination allows you, what if you were on the side of the tenants? What if you were to realize, one day, that your resistance and hard-heartedness was wrong? What if you even took violent action when you were wrong? How would you wish to be treated then? With vengeance, or with mercy?

It is difficult to ignore the parallel with this parable and what will happen to Jesus at the end of his earthly ministry. Like the son of the developer, Jesus will be killed by the tenants of God's Holy City, Jerusalem. The Temple Government, the Roman Government, they will all conspire to lead him to an ignominious death, rather than listen to the message that Jesus has from his Father above.

And yet, in all that mess, what does God do? At Easter, the Risen Christ returns, but not with vengeance against the evil acts of the tenants of the Holy City. Instead, the risen Christ came in peace with forgiveness. It was a scandal to so many, an impossible thought. But in God's wisdom, the only way out of the mess was ever more mercy, ever more persistence, and through his Spirit, the disciples and then the whole Church would become that persistent merciful presence in the world, seeking to enfold both victim and oppressor into the same divine rule. And you know what, the wide presence of the Church throughout the world, up to our day and in this city, is the fruit of this steady commitment to God's true purpose for us.

When Jesus tells us about God's love, and acts out God's love, we see that it is able to withstand not being heard, being resisted, being attacked. And in all that, God does not reflect our vengeance back at us. As our old prayer book said, "God's property is always to have mercy." Another word for this is *chesed*, which is Hebrew for "steadfast love."

In all this mess, what are we to do? Well, because of our Scriptures, and because of Jesus, we can't be surprised that people will not listen to one another. Our plan, like God's plan, has to take into account the hard-heartedness that is out there. And in such a world, we step out in steadfast love, in *chesed*. With prayers of sorrow and prayers of support we show that steadfast love. And with prayer-soaked hearts, our entire selves will be set on the true path, a Way of action, the Way of doing justice, loving mercy, and walking humbly with our God.

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