

Matthew 21:33-46
October 8, 2017

Grace and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ!

On behalf of the faithful people of God at Bethany Lutheran in West Branch, I bring you greetings in the name of Christ. It's truly a joy and honor to be with you all this morning. Last week, I attended a seminar on exactly what I am doing this very minute – preaching, proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ. As part of that time together four preaching professors from seminaries across the nation each delivered a sermon and then explained how they got to the final script. Trust me, I won't bore you with all of that; however, one of the sermons did speak to me a bit about this morning. The Bible passage she was using came from the Apostle Paul's first letter to the Corinthian Church in which he states, in summary of a much larger passage, that the body of Christ is the church and each member, whether Jew or Gentile, slave or free is part of it. (1 Corinthians 12:12-31) She went on to discuss how at times we interpret this body or think of it more in spiritual terms; that is, it is a mystical body of sorts that will come to fruition on the last day. What she moved us to see is the flesh of the body. The body incarnate just as God became human in Christ. Because when we see the body as more than simply spiritual we see one another. We see the will of God

overcoming division and differences and joining us together connected to the cornerstone, which of course is Jesus Christ, the head of the body. We see God using each and every one of us together to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ, to glorify what God has done through the birth, death, and resurrection of the Son, and to be his hands and feet of love, peace, compassion, forgiveness, joy, and hope in the world. We see a body marked not by race, class, status, gender, age, nationality, etc. but rather we see a flesh and blood body where all come together as equals and hand-in-hand join with their Lord and Savior.ⁱ

That text struck me because anytime I visit another congregation whether to preach or just to worship I truly experience the incarnation of the body of Christ come to life in being church together and I suspect the same thing happens to each of you when you worship at another congregation. Those labels we adorn one another with fade away and we stand face-to-face simply as sons and daughters of the living God. We shake hands, sing and pray, partake of the Lord's Supper, share signs of Christ's peace, and put aside whatever may separate us from one another. Such as the fact I am a West Branch Bear or most of you are probably Tipton Tigers. Yes, I have been here long enough to understand the rivalry between our two communities when it comes to athletics. Or no longer am I just another pastor in another congregation and no longer are you all just

another congregation of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. We do this each and every time we gather in the name of Christ and are assured of his presence among us. This morning is special because I put a face with the wonderful people of God here at Trinity Lutheran, Pastor Wartick puts a face with the people of God at Bethany Lutheran, and the people of God gathered there and here do exactly the same. We are part of something much larger. We are part of the amazing, beautiful, majestic, and very real body of Christ alive and active in the world today.

I was feeling so good about things. So excited to be with you. But then I looked ahead to the gospel passage I just read with horrific images of violence which then brought my mind back around to another senseless, ruthless, heinous, and irrational act of death and bloodshed that wasn't simply a parable on the pages of the Bible but rather reality upon all those gathered a week ago in Las Vegas to innocently enjoy the musical stylings of their favorite singers and bands. 58 dead. 489 wounded. Lives lost. Lives forever changed. A community, nation and world emotionally wounded. A family left dumbfounded as to why their loved one would do such an evil act. People living with guilt of surviving. Why? What leads another human being to stockpile 42 guns built with the intention and ability to deliver quick and deadly force to many? What hatred fills one person's

heart so much so as to take the lives of people he didn't even know? Why is this playing out time and time again in our communities and when will we put aside our differences and say no more and work together to find solutions?

And then one-by-one the pictures of the dead began to surface on the screens of our televisions and on the pages of so many websites. No longer were they simply people gathered in Las Vegas we didn't know. Now we could put a face with the name, not unlike what we are doing today. Now we could see they weren't just strangers. They were our neighbors. They were sons and daughters lovingly created by the same God who breathed life into each of us. They were mothers and fathers, sons and daughters, grandmothers and grandfathers, husbands and wives, teachers, bankers, coaches, waitress', students, police officers, volunteers, lawyers, librarians, and bus drivers just to name a few. They were from Canada and America. They were from California and Nevada, Massachusetts and Tennessee, West Virginia and Minnesota, Alaska and Utah, Pennsylvania and Arizona, Colorado and New Mexico, Washington and then it hit even closer to home as one, Carly Kreibaum, a wife and mother of two young children who worked at Wal-Mart was from the small, rural town of Sutherland in Northwest Iowa. A community not unlike West Branch or Tipton. Certainly some were Christians – members of the body of Christ. They could just as easily been

you are I. One of our sons or daughters. And I could do was plead, Lord, have mercy.

The Bible isn't immune to violence. It's been part of the flesh and blood of humanity since sin entered the world. We find it in today's text revealing itself as the result of fear, greed, power or rather the threat of losing control and power. Jesus tells this parable in Jerusalem in which he knows the violent and tragic end that is fast approaching. He knows these very same emotions will corrupt the hearts of many and lead to the most heinous form of violence of the day – death on a cross. It's often easy to read this as just another Bible text written hundreds of years ago and directed toward another group of people, which, often has been the case. This text has been used wrongly to condemn one group of people, the Jews, and elevate another, the Christian church causing much pain and division. Yet, I can't help but read this text and wonder when has fear led me to hold on to something at the expense of another? When has the threat of losing power and control seeped into our own congregations and thwarted us from truly being the body of Christ and welcoming and loving all? When has greed made me look only to myself and not to the neighbor I am called to love just as Jesus loved? When has the church wrongly thought of itself as the owner of the vineyard and not

faithfully stewarded the gifts we are entrusted with? Yes, this text continues to speak to us today.

The church often finds itself in the text as the people to whom the landowner will give the kingdom to who will bear fruit (v. 43). At times, I find myself in the role of the leaders when I, too, fail in my attempts to shepherd God's people. Personally, I have never located myself as one of the servants going to gather the harvest from the tenants; however, following this horrific massacre in Las Vegas and so many other acts of hatred, violence and injustice in our world I wonder if we aren't being called to be those servants. To venture into places in which we don't know what we will find and what it might lead to. To be the sent ones of the landowner in gathering and bearing forth the fruit of the kingdom. In standing up to unjust tenants who deem themselves superior to another or use violent means to take that which is not theirs and leads another to go without fruit of the harvest. In speaking out for those voices which are silenced. In following the Son of God, the cornerstone of our faith, into even the darkest of places where death is lurking. I often am not sure that's where I want to go but that is where God sends us. That is where God sent God's son. That is where God meets us. Meets the world God so loves.

And ultimately that is how we read a difficult passage such as this and find hope in the midst of heinous acts of evil such as we witnessed in Las Vegas. We find God bringing death out of life. We find Jesus hanging on a cross not speaking words of revenge or hate but rather pleading with his Father to forgive those who have scorned him. We see the risen Jesus lovingly restoring the relationship with those who had abandoned him. Even denied knowing him. We see salvation enacted and opened up to all people. We see a vision of the kingdom in which death will never have the final word. Life will. Eternal life. Forgiveness will reign. Violence will not beget more violence. Death will not beget more death. The light of Christ will shine through the darkness. The flesh of the body will rise again. Life will breathe again. Love will win again. Hope will prevail again. Joy will overcome pain and sorrow. Love will overcome hate. The body will be united and joined again to the cornerstone of our faith. Jesus Christ. Amen.

ⁱ Sermon on 1 Corinthians 12 delivered by Barbara Lundblad on October 2, 2017 at Luther Seminary, St. Paul, Minnesota.

Holy One, you do not distance yourself from the pain of your people, but in Jesus you bear that pain with all who suffer at others' hands. With your cleansing love bring healing and strength to all suffer in body, mind and spirit. Especially, on this day we pray for those in parts of our nations, in Puerto Rico, and other islands of the Caribbean dealing with the devastation from recent hurricanes. And we pray for those who have died and been wounded from the violent act carried out a week ago in Las Vegas. In the midst of the pain and death bring about the hope of life. Bear forth your healing presence. Move our prayers to words of action to be voices for the dead and wounded and work to bring an end to these senseless tragedies. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.