

Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20

Psalm 19

Philippians 3:4b-14

Matthew 21:33-46

Last week I had the opportunity to read an inspirational meditation written by my friend, Dan, to his church congregation. The members of this congregation take turns writing these meditations on their own perspective of the world and how their faith influences how they react to what they see and experience and how they decide what to do. Dan is a doctor whose practice is in one of the poorest neighborhoods in Northern Virginia. He's been in practice there for over twenty years and he talks about how gratifying it is to share life with folks who have so little and yet love so much. They take care of one another and they also look after their 'doc' as well. What Dan did say in his meditation was that not all of his patients are easy to love. And not all of his patients generate his respect. He complains about the patient who is drug seeking or the one who is trying to scam the Medicare/Medicaid system to get care that he doesn't really need. These folks aren't thoughtful, conscientious people. They often aren't honest. They are folks looking out for #1 as best they can. As unprincipled as these patients are, Dan realized that they do need his help. They do need food to eat and they do need a place to sleep. And sometimes they actually do need medical care. They also need encouragement, reinforcement for good efforts and simple kindness even though their behavior inspires none of those reactions from others. They need respect and love by virtue of the fact that they are children of God as hard as it is to respect and love them. Dan shared a quote from the C. S. Lewis essay *On Forgiveness*: "To be a Christian means to forgive the inexcusable, because God has forgiven the inexcusable in you." God never forces us to behave ourselves. God holds us with open arms even when we are miserable as a result of our own actions.

Jesus has just told us a wonderful allegorical tale in the gospel this morning that feeds right into this notion of forgiveness for the inexcusable. In this story, the vineyard is described as a well-appointed piece of land (which is the nation of Israel) used and inhabited by the tenants (the religious leaders) chosen by the landlord (God). When it's time to pay the landlord for use of the land by turning over some of the harvest, the tenants rebel. They brutalize the messengers (the prophets sent by God). When the landlord sends more messengers, the tenants react in the same way. So the landlord decides to send his son (that's Jesus) to collect what is due from the tenants, which seems a rather naïve thing to do, but hope springs eternal that the tenants will recognize who the son is and how important he is and they will straighten up and behave themselves and pay what is due to the landlord. But that's not what happens. They brutalize and kill the son as well.

This allegory is not lost on those listening to Jesus preaching and teaching. They know who all the players are in this tale, so when Jesus asks them what the landlord (God) ends up doing to the wicked tenants, all those listening tell Jesus, "He will put those wretches to a miserable death and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at harvest time." That's not entirely the message from Jesus. That's the human way of looking at all this and that perspective is limited. Jesus

does not confirm that God is going to respond with angry retribution for the wickedness of the tenants, although God has always had to risk violence in order to be in relationship with humanity. God is going to use what the tenants threw away (the messengers of God and the Son of God) to build a whole new kingdom. What the wicked tenants destroyed will become the cornerstone of the new kingdom. And the new kingdom will be given to a people that produce the fruits of the kingdom. God never forces himself on us. He holds us with open arms.

Now the wicked tenants...the people of Israel...have already been given the instructions for producing the fruits of the kingdom...the fruits that God is looking for. We just heard them this morning is the Old Testament reading that presented us with the Ten Commandments. These are the rules that God laid down for the people of Israel so that they could live a good life...with God...which is covered in the first four commandments...and with each other...which is covered in the remaining six commandments. God gave them...and us...all the information needed to live a life that would please God and would help usher in the kingdom of God. But the Israelites didn't listen...and neither do we. If they had not rejected God and the commandments God had given them, there would have been no need for Jesus to come to earth. Israel would already have been in right relationship with God, but Israel chose to reject God instead. We need to remember that it's us who reject God, not the other way around. God always holds us with open arms.

And we Christians didn't learn much from the missteps of Israel. We, too, choose to reject God. We have the same commandments they had and we even had a flesh and blood teacher who lived among us and showed us what the Israelites apparently didn't understand or didn't get right in trying to live by the Ten Commandments. But we don't either. The world of Christians is every bit as rejecting of God as the Israelites were in the era when Jesus walked the earth. Even with a flesh and blood teacher to show us how to put these commandments into practice, we still fail. We still reject God. And yet, Jesus's presence among us is proof that God doesn't turn his back on us. God holds us with open arms.

But you see, if we deny that God exists, we don't have to feel any responsibility toward Him or toward the commandments He gave us or any allegiance to His son, Jesus, whom He sent to set us on the path toward God. For example, if we believe that the behavior of human beings has no bearing on the changes in climate that seem to be assaulting the world, then we don't feel any obligation to change our behavior. We also don't feel any gratitude to God for the beauty of the world we occupy.

If we don't believe in a Divine Creator who created every human being in His own image, then we can justify and excuse every attitude or action that renders someone different from us as "Other." There seems to be no limit to what we will do or what we will allow to be done to anyone that we deem to be "Other." We can be as brutal as the wicked tenants who beat and murdered the messengers in Jesus' allegory in Matthew.

In our own country, we maintained slavery for 246 years and practiced segregation for another 100 years and allowed Jim Crow laws up until this day because we were able to define black people as "Other." We nearly eradicated every semblance of tribes and the nations of Native Americans for the

same reason. This phenomenon is not unique to the United States. The Germans perpetrated the Holocaust on Jewish people by defining them as “other.” In South Africa, the subjugation of black people was called apartheid. In twenty-first century India there is still a group of people known as the untouchables. In the Balkans in central Europe and in regions of central Africa, the group of folks in power identified the ‘other’ in their midst and set about ethnic cleansing to eradicate them. And in Australia, the aboriginal people are still discriminated against. When we reject some of God’s people, we reject the God who created them. And yet, God continues to hold us with open arms.

In this allegory in Matthew, Jesus says that the one who falls on this stone...the cornerstone that God has chosen...will be broken into pieces. And Jesus says that this same stone will crush anyone on whom it falls. We can’t serve two masters. We can’t serve God and the powers of this world at the same time. It won’t work. It’s not that God is going to destroy us with the cornerstone...perhaps he’s going to knock some sense into us with the cornerstone. Once God has our attention and our focus, we can see where true life lies. Once we’ve been humbled, we are prepared to make some changes, not because we have to or because God is forcing us to, but because we can begin to see the value and the reward in living the way God has asked us to live. When we see the value of putting aside the greed, the competition, the judgment, the criticism, the spite, the intolerance, the dishonesty, the meanness, the brutality, the jealousy, the pride, and the envy, we will be open to pursuing the fruits of the spirit. And we know what those are. We have the Ten Commandments in the Book of Exodus. They are God’s rules for living given to the Israelites. And we have the fruits of the Spirit given to Christians through St. Paul’s letter to the Galatians. And those are: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. (Gallatians 5:22-23)

Not too long ago, I saw a bumper sticker that stuck with me. It said: *“The world you desire comes not by chance but by change.”* And it’s not going to be someone else’s ‘change.’ It’s going to be our own change. Last week we were asked whether or not we were willing and/or able to change our minds. It seems that changing our minds is the first step toward changing our behavior and we can’t change anyone’s behavior but our own. It doesn’t happen by chance. It happens by change. And even if we don’t change, God continues to hold us with open arms.

If you think that changing is too hard for you, you are not alone. Most of us do what we do because it is easier than making a deliberate and conscious effort to do something differently...or to even think about things in a different way. Don’t depend on your own will and ability to get it done. Trust in the mercy of God and the strength of our Lord, Jesus Christ who will provide all the assistance we need to help us do as God has asked us to do....even as God holds us with open arms.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.