



# Still Listening



## **The Collect**

Almighty and everlasting God, you are always more ready to hear than we to pray, and to give more than we either desire or deserve: Pour upon us the abundance of your mercy, forgiving us those things of which our conscience is afraid, and giving us those good things for which we are not worthy to ask, except through the merits and mediation of Jesus Christ our Savior; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

## **First Reading** *Isaiah 5:1-7*

Let me sing for my beloved my love-song concerning his vineyard:  
My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill.  
He dug it and cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines;  
he built a watchtower in the midst of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it;



he expected it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes.  
And now, inhabitants of Jerusalem  
and people of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard.  
What more was there to do for my vineyard that I have not done in it?  
When I expected it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes?  
And now I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard.  
I will remove its hedge, and it shall be devoured;  
I will break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down.  
I will make it a waste; it shall not be pruned or hoed,  
and it shall be overgrown with briars and thorns;  
I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it.  
For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts is the house of Israel,  
and the people of Judah are his pleasant planting;  
he expected justice, but saw bloodshed;  
righteousness, but heard a cry!

### **The Epistle**      *Philippians 1:21-30*

If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.

Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.



## **Gospel**    *Matthew 20:1-16*

Jesus said, "Listen to another parable. There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a wine press in it, and built a watchtower. Then he leased it to tenants and went to another country. When the harvest time had come, he sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his produce. But the tenants seized his slaves and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. Again he sent other slaves, more than the first; and they treated them in the same way. Finally he sent his son to them, saying, '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.'" So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him. Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?" They said to him, "He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the harvest time."

Jesus said to them, "Have you never read in the scriptures:

'The stone that the builders rejected  
has become the cornerstone;  
this was the Lord's doing,  
and it is amazing in our eyes'?

Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom. The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls."

When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they realized that he was speaking about them. They wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowds, because they regarded him as a prophet.



Each in our own way, there was not one of us who didn't love Ryan. I knew him as his theology teacher in his junior year of high school. He drove his pick-up truck as a day student to the boarding school I worked at and he attended in rural Virginia, wearing an army fatigue Virginia Tech baseball cap and toting a shotgun in the cab - neither of which were allowed under school rules, but Ryan was one of those kids who was hard to pin down.

In the classroom, Ryan didn't say a whole lot; he spoke when he was spoken to, but his reddened cheeks gave away the fact that thinking out loud in front of others was not his favorite past-time. For Ryan, the bell for the close of the school day could not come soon enough. Windows down, country music blasting on the car stereo, a trail of dust behind him, and he was gone. We loved him, and I think in his way, he loved us too.

It was on one of those journeys home that Ryan's life came to its premature end. He was driving too fast around a corner, lost control, veered off the road and while a seatbelt most likely would have saved his life, he was not wearing



one. He never did, apparently, and all of a sudden, the light we had shared as a school community turned to darkness.

There is something particularly painful about the sudden loss of children, no matter how grown-up those children seem to appear, and in our small school setting, Ryan's loss hit us hard. Teachers and students alike were numb. As much as people tried, no explanation for Ryan's loss really worked: no neat divine plan that would fit, no test of faith that seemed to justify such a needless death. Neither the questions nor their formulaic answers helped, they simply distracted us from the real business at hand: of meeting each other where we needed to be met.

As chaplain of the school, in the days that followed I decided to walk the corridors of the dorms in the evening, dropping in on students I knew to have been close to Ryan, and just 'being there' for the rest. Some of the boys wanted to talk, yet as the days passed, I noticed that something else was happening. In their clumsy and adolescent sort of way, they were learning to listen to one another, and in that simple gift, the journey to healing began.



How badly we could do with some of that right now in our nation's life: the capacity to listen such that we might have room enough to know who it is we are listening to.

There is a chilling familiarity to the sequence of events as they have unfolded this week following the terrible loss of life in Las Vegas last Sunday. First, the sheer horror of it all. Then, speculation about the why's and the how's, followed by the well-rehearsed litany of cases to be made on each side of the political aisle, some of it the same as the last time there was a mass shooting, some of it new, and all of it getting us nowhere but more and more estranged from one another; which is why it matters that you came here today.

People have been critical this week of the use of the phrase, 'thoughts and prayers', suggesting that thoughts and prayers are not enough, and of course they are not, yet it strikes me that as the church, our best hope of being of service to the world we live in, is to be people who deeply engage in thought and prayer. For at times like this, the best that we may have to offer is the depth of our prayerful



selves and the growing knowledge we might gain of a God whom a violent world has yet to truly know.

It is true, I believe, that our country needs to have a real conversation about the place of guns in our society, and the anomalous homicide and suicide rate that such weapons are part of. The first step to us beating our addiction to violence is to admit that we have a problem. Yet we would be remiss to limit the thought we give to such things to what happens within our 50 states. We live in a profoundly violent and weaponized world. In the imagery of Isaiah, the vineyard has produced the sour grapes of destruction the world over. We might ask why. Why is it that we find violence so entertaining? Why does violence sell movies and win elections? Why is it still so prevalent against women and children and the elderly in so many parts of the world? And given such a global reality, and our seeming incapacity to do anything about it, why do people so quickly and easily dismiss non-violence, the way of Jesus of Nazareth, as impractical, or naive?



We might be tempted into thinking that naivety is at work in the mind of the landowner in Jesus' parable we heard this morning. Once more in the vineyard, this time the vineyard of the world, on each occasion that the landowner seeks to collect the fruits of the land, the tenants kill the landowner's messenger. It happens twice over before the landowner decides to send his own son, who also is killed. What's the theology here, then? Naive landowner; wicked tenants - if only God had more street smarts.

It could seem that way, but the core element of the parable is actually at the end, in the form of the question Jesus asks: *"when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?"* The response the listeners offer is that the landowner will put *'those wretches to a miserable death'*. In other words, acts of violence call for greater acts of violence to set the record straight. Yet this is not Jesus' answer at all. His reply calls his listeners to return to the scriptures, saying: *'The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone'*. In other words, Jesus' self-donation on the cross, his violent rejection at the hands of his people, is not the act of a naive God overpowered by the world, it is the





revelation to us of the true nature of power, the only power, in fact, that has the capacity to change us.

I believe that we live in a world addicted to violence because we continue to mistake power for our capacity to act over and against one another. I believe that we cannot talk to one another in this country about rights in our society because we continue to mistake freedom for what we think we should be entitled to get or have, and not what our theology teaches freedom to be: the life in God where we are liberated from needing anything for ourselves.

The world does need your thoughts and prayers, and it needs you to bring your capacity to listen with your ears inclined to the language of God's transformative and self-donating love. In doing so, I pray that you may know the grace to which you are called and bring that immeasurable power for transformation to the conversation around you. God is still listening for that heartbeat of love. So must we.