

# Sermon

All Saints' Episcopal Church

The Rev. Dr. Simon J. Mainwaring  
Gospel Reading: Matthew 21:33-46  
Sunday, October 4, 2020



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.

We offer our heartfelt prayers this morning for the health and recovery of the President, and for all those who have fallen sick with Covid-19. President Trump’s hospitalization is a reminder of how fragile the gift of life is. May God’s love and grace uphold and support him and his family at this time.

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When the most protected and powerful person in the world gets sick with a deadly virus, just like any of us could, it serves as a reminder that there are so many more foundational ways that we are the same as one another, than we are different. This has not been a good year for acknowledging our sameness. Our cultural milieu emphasizes differences to be appear as what is most present and pressing in our relationships with others, and as a consequence we so often find ourselves pulled apart from one another. This is a sermon about what it is like when our lives hear the call to bring ourselves back together. It begins in an office in San Diego.

A lot happened in that meeting room situated above the rector's office. At one point, we figured out that every month something like 1,500 people came through the door of the odd-shaped room that ran along the back of the organ loft. They came there for help; for friendship; for someone to bear witness to their struggle for wellness; and for the coffee. Coffee was essential, and the groups that met there made a lot of it, which was why I thought I was in my office below that meeting room, having a conversation with Lester about the restrooms.

Seven years as rector of a church in coastal California gave me plenty of opportunity to appreciate the significance of restrooms in church life. Little did Lester know, but I was by then fully conversant as to how many restrooms our preschool needed per square foot and number of children. I had already learned about the virtues of a soffit pump. I knew how to plan for safe restroom use when we ran a night shelter for families recently facing homelessness. And I could recognize the tell-tale signs when one of the regulars at our breakfast for those sleeping unhoused had attempted to flush a whole loaf of bread down the ladies lavatory. There are other stories I could tell, but most are not good for the listener this side of lunch. What I didn't know was how a restroom could save a life. Enter Lester.

Prior to our conversation, there had been a fair bit of back and forth between the church office and the various meeting leaders about damage to the restrooms, consequent maintenance and cleaning needs, and how access now needed to be managed.

"I don't think you realize just how crucial these restrooms are," Lester began.

He was right, I didn't.

“For some of these men and women who slept outdoors the night before,” Lester went on, “having that moment to be able to clean themselves up so that they can walk up those stairs and into that room is the difference between living and dying. This might be the only place in their lives where they are seen for who they are. We are grateful that this church hosts our AA and NA meetings, but folks have got to be able to get into those restrooms ahead of time.”

In that parish, each month hundreds of men, women and children living on the street made their way through our doors. Homelessness in beach communities across the state placed high real estate values and the economic benefits of tourism, in direct conflict with people without homes who held little to no economic power. The church’s ministry among the homeless placed us right in the middle.

I had tried and failed to bring people together through a local homelessness coalition of housed and unhoused neighbors. It started well, but after a few gatherings things deteriorated. Parents whose kids previously I had coached soccer, angrily blamed the church for ‘enabling homelessness’. Local business leaders and politicians shouted across the room, and the people there from the homeless population, tired of being blamed for all the city’s ills, shouted back. We were told that the church was naive about how many problems people on the street were causing the neighborhood, and that if we really were good neighbors, we’d stop feeding and clothing and sheltering them.

The work of reconciliation is hard, and as in my case, it often leads to failure. My hopes for brokering ‘peace in our time’ faltered in the end, which was difficult to take because I had seen another side of the story. I had held the funeral of Jenny, who had died on our church’s front doorstep. We gathered family from across California and beyond who had not seen her in years. It was one of the most poignant evenings of my life. A few months later, I had called guests from our weekly supper for people living on the street for an impromptu memorial for Rhys, a whimsical septuagenarian homeless veteran who had been needlessly killed simply because a driver took an illegal left turn while Rhys was crossing the street. The driver claimed he hadn’t seen him, which for those gathered that evening was no surprise, because the homeless are so often rendered invisible. I grieved Rhys’s death for weeks, and part of me still does.

I should have known why Lester cared so much about our restrooms. Before he had even finished his appeal, I knew he was right. Opening a restroom was the least we could offer. People need to be seeable. People need the chance to find union with others. That kind of reconciliation is a matter of life and death when you straddle the edge of existence every day.

We fail. We learn. We grow. That is certainly my story, and it's also the story played out day by day on this city block, which although absent our own gathering in place, is witness to the courage of men on their road to recovery in the ministry of Covenant Community. Covenant is what perseverance looks like when three decades later a church doesn't give up on the work of reconciliation, on helping people re-build themselves and the relationships that have been fractured by addiction and homelessness. If you're looking for motivation to dig out that canvass envelope from the church this week, or log in online to make your pledge, look no further than the video that began this service and to the life-changing ministry of Covenant Community.

Yet it is not Covenant alone that bears witness to the power of reconciliation. All Saints' is home to other such ministries that have the distinction of maturing over time, such as our Threads free clothing boutique for children and our refugee ministries. If these are less well-known to you, I invite you to speak to someone who volunteers and ask what it feels like to see and to be seen by others when a child wears a new pair of shoes for the first time, or when a family arrives in this country to a welcome party and a furnished home because of this church. Listen to the stories of what it looks like when people seek union with others. It is powerful, and mutually transformational, and it is what grace looks like in living form.

Reconciliation maturing over time is not a bad shorthand statement of the mission of the church. Our calling is to seek union. In a world fractured by pride and avarice and shame, reconciliation is the church's core work, a message our scriptures this morning repeat, one reading after the other.

Let's first consider Exodus and its laying out of the ten commandments. Because it is so familiar, we might easily overlook the remarkable fact of what is happening: that the Creator of the heavens and the earth has not only acted to free the Hebrew slaves, this same God now makes covenant with them, laying out in the law the scope of the union between the irreducible divine life and these nobodies of the ancient near east. It's hard for us to capture quite how outrageous this claim was at the time. To say that the divine seeks union, seeks to make a life with the formerly enslaved, was a profound reversal of the usual sequence, where gods were seen to favor the mighty, the conquering king, the anointed vessels of divine power on earth. It was a theological scandal to proclaim that the Lord God seeks union with common humanity, in particular the least among us. Yet there it is: God moves toward us in all of our failings and fears, seeking us out all the same.

If our reading from Exodus speaks of God's desire to be in union with us, Paul's letter to the Philippians speaks of what we must do to reciprocate, which is to rid ourselves of what gets in the way of that life-changing relationship.

Having laid out his own identity markers of prestige - 'circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews' and so on - Paul names all of that as 'skubala', a remarkable Greek word, found in the New Testament only here in Paul's letter to the Philippians. Skubala, sometimes translated as 'rubbish' is more accurately rendered as 'dung'. You might think of alternative, more colorful translations and reach the same point, which is that Paul not only calls us to move on from the power-plays that can characterize our lives, he wants us to see them for what they really are: something to be expelled from our bodies, recognized as toxic to our well-being, waste that will poison our inner selves should we let it and make it impossible for us to fulfill our calling to find union with our fellow human beings.

Taken together, then, in Exodus and Philippians we see how God the Creator seeks union with us, especially the least, and how we have to do our part to cleanse ourselves of all that might rend us apart and falsely place us above others. Yet, it takes the parable of the vineyard in Matthew's gospel to see the power that enables us to be people who will persevere as reconcilers in God's kingdom.

Contextualized as it is with its unfortunate imagery of servitude, the landowner sends slaves to his vineyard for the harvest, only to see them murdered by the tenants. The same happens, over and over, until the landowner's son is sent. "They will respect my son", the Father says aloud. My own. My beloved. It is of course an allegory for the cross, the sending of Jesus, the Son of the Father, into a world that will indeed condemn him to the same death that faced the prophets.

A great deal of energy has been expended interpreting the significance of the crucifixion in Christian theology. For myself, while I can't accept theologies of the cross that see it as a transaction - as the mechanism for how the Son is sacrificed to either an angry god, or one in need of a blood or debt payment for sin - I do believe that the cross remains at the heart of the Christian faith because it shows us what divine solidarity looks like. It shows us how utterly God desires to be at-one with us. It is, indeed, a picture of the theology of an atonement, of an at-onement, of the limitless divine urge for the Creator to be in union with creation.

Yet, here's the crucial thing: it is that divine desire to be God with us, that presence of grace, that transforms us to become the people God intends for us to be, empowering us to do the work of reconciliation. God's prime movement to us, revealed in the horror of the cross, is how we become more than just a collection of somewhat like-minded individuals and are formed into the Body of Christ. And in becoming such a people we hear our calling to see that same grace of God incarnate in every human being, especially those we are at odds with or estranged from.

Reconciliation is so very challenging. Those years of ministry among beachfront outdoor sleepers were not the first when I had to accept that the failure of re-union is just the nature of the struggle we must face for life to thrive. Whatever disunity you might feel as we enter the final stretch of this presidential election year, however hard you feel the prospect of being at one with others might be, I pray that you will hear the call to draw near to each other so that together we can be the church in the midst of this city and among its people. We are made to be reconcilers, resolute that God is able to transform all that draws us apart.

A lot happened in the meeting room above my office. Much of it I couldn't see, but God was in the midst of them and they were changed. I pray, in all of my failings, that I might know that same grace in my own life, and continue to find a way to speak of that unspeakable glory to you.