

18th Sunday After Pentecost – Lectionary 27

Sunday, October 4, 2020 – Synod Staff Sermon

Isaiah 5:1-7; Psalm 80:7-15; Philippians 3:4b-14; MATTHEW 21:33-46

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The Holy Gospel, according to Matthew, the 21st Chapter:

[Jesus said to the people:] 33“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. 34When the harvest time had come, he sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his produce. 35But the tenants seized his slaves and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. 36Again he sent other slaves, more than the first; and they treated them in the same way. 37Finally he sent his son to them, saying, ‘They will respect my son.’ 38But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, ‘This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance.’ 39So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him. 40Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?” 41They 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.”

42Jesus 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’?

43Therefore 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. 44The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls.”

45When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they realized that he was speaking about them. 46They wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowds, because they regarded him as a prophet.

The Gospel of the Lord...

My son got a tiny helicopter for Christmas when he was 8 years old – you hook it into the controller to charge it. Made of Styrofoam and plastic...it wasn’t going to last long. On it’s maiden voyage, my son pressed the controls; it lifted itself up; then promptly smashed into the wall, crashed to the ground, never to fly again.

Or maybe you’ve seen Tommy Boy – a cinematic and comedic wonder. Tommy (the main character in this movie) and his sales partner are at a diner. Tommy comes to a self-revelation: he grabs a roll and describes how his sales are like that dinner roll – it is a gift – that he eventually destroys (and shreds the roll to bits and pieces). He ruins the gift.

The dinner roll that is shredded to pieces, the toy helicopter that crashes into the wall, never to work again – reminds me that we have gifts that we take for granted.

When I think about the Church, I think about the gift of the GOSPEL that we have been given.

We have the Gospel, but what do we do with it???

You know, many Lutherans – like myself – trace our roots back to Scandinavian and German ancestors. We have cherished the gospel gift over the aeons, and found ways to share that gift. Just by saying this – I know I have already alienated those who have not come from those roots...but hang on, because this is part of the larger point of this sermon

Over the Atlantic, one way the Gospel traveled was with Lutherans who emigrated to America. I have Lutheran and Catholic roots. I have relatives who traveled across the Atlantic, Irish Roman Catholic relatives and Norwegian Lutheran relatives who actually all spent some time in Brooklyn, but who eventually settled in New Jersey, where, eventually, in 1978, I was born into this world and baptized at Holy Trinity LC, Hasbrouck Heights, NJ.

Every generation is given the gift of the Gospel to share; and it looks different in each generation. What the Gospel looked like in the time of Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob; what it looked like in the time of the Judges and Prophets; what it looked like in the time of Jesus and Paul and the early church...the Gospel varied according to each context...but at the heart of the Gospel, we could always find hope and mercy and justice for all

As we grow into our understanding of the Gospel, we pick up from our ancestors, a way to express that Gospel, to love, to serve, to challenge, to welcome, to accept. And yet, quite often, we turn inward. We use insider language. Sometimes we stick with the cultural tie to our heritage as Lutherans.

We can easily forget the message of the Gospel being for ALL people. It is not just Germans and Scandinavian folks...though they are certainly carriers of this Gospel.

Back in Brooklyn, in the 1920 and 1930s, when my ancestors worshipped. Those Lutheran services were spoken in the Norwegian language. And that was what was needed in that context in that time. People who emigrated from Norway, and were Lutheran, identified themselves as Christian, Lutheran, and Norwegian...and that made sense...for them...at that time...

This is helpful: to meet the people where they are...but then at some point, that congregation either closed or adapted to the changing context. The GOSPEL didn't change, but the city of Brooklyn changed.

As we do the work of the Gospel, we are called to look around and notice where people are, and meet them there. For the GOSPEL is not just a stand-alone thing. The GOSPEL is always found in a context. The TRUTH of the Gospel is spoken, lived out, and realized in community. Once we define the Gospel, we tend to

start thinking that we have “arrived” at the perfect understanding. Then we take a stance of DEFENDING that position at ALL COSTS. And what does that leave us with??? BROKENNESS

We are left with a brokenness, a division, and with that division comes SELFISHNESS. And We have turned that precious life-giving gift of THE GOSPEL, and turned into OUR gospel, which is bent towards OUR desires and OUR wants and OUR control.

A friend of mine says if he had to define SIN, in one word, he would use that word: “SELFISH”

The broader understanding of what it means to be Christian has had to be expanded over time to incorporate our context and to – unfortunately – find ways for the Gospel to serve our *personal* needs. One way the Gospel has served the needs of Americans and especially (though not exclusively) to white Americans in the South is through the twisting of the scriptures to support white supremacy, through endorsing practices to show WHITE people as superior to other races. That sentiment has left its ugly stain on the American Church

The gift of the Gospel has been twisted and used to serve selfish gain. White supremacy has tainted the American Church, and white supremacy has clouded the gift of the Gospel. It’s no wonder that many people would rather be “religiously unaffiliated” than to stand with an organization that has supported white supremacy

But all hope is not lost...

Over time, faith leaders have stood up – prophets of our time, like Rev. Robert Graetz and his wife, Jeannie. Pastor Graetz served in an all-black Lutheran congregation in Montgomery, AL, during the 1950’s and assisted with the Montgomery bus boycotts, his way of living out the Gospel in that place / time.

How did the community thank Pastor Graetz for his courageous acts? By setting off bombs around his home, one leaving a 15-inch crater in his driveway. His public witness is now memorialized as we (in the Southeastern Synod of the ELCA) honor Pr. Bob and Jean Graetz, through a named award, for those who show outstanding work in the field of advocacy. Bright spots are here, but we have a LOT of digging to get through the chains of white supremacy, and it’s gonna take the Gospel to get out of this situation we are in.

We do the work of taking this precious gift of the Gospel and appreciate it for what it IS, not for what WE want it to be.

Jesus tells us the perfect story – today – about a vineyard owner in Matthew 21. The owner of a vineyard goes away, but asks for a vinedresser and workers to take care of the vineyard. What happens? They twist the gift for their own gain. They see the lush vines and start thinking: “Why do we have to turn over these fruits that WE worked so hard for? Why can’t we keep these grapes for OURSELVES?”

In that selfishness, they begin to feel like this gift of grapes is OWED to them, for they worked so hard! So the vineyard owner decides to collect some of the fruits of the vine and sends servants to gather and collect what the vineyard workers grew. The result? The vineyard workers killed two sets of servants, then killed the vineyard owner’s son!

Jesus challenges the scribes and Pharisees with this story; Jesus asks them, what they think the vineyard owner should do now?! The scribes and Pharisees say: “He will utterly destroy those evil men! Then he will lease the vineyard to **other** tenants who will give him his portion at the harvest” (MT 21:41). Jesus replies with a quote from Psalm 118: “Have you never read in the scriptures: ““The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. This is from the Lord, and it is marvelous in our eyes””??

Jesus continues in v. 43: “For this reason I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit.”

So now, the scribes realize Jesus is pointing out THEIR faults; that they have been called to STEWARD (to care for) the gift of the GOSPEL and they have turned it for their own gain. They are rejecting Jesus – God’s own son, and it stings so much; but their reaction is not a move to repentance, but to DEFEND THEMSELVES, and harm JESUS.

When we find out WE have been wrong, what do we do? We defend ourselves! Folks, this is the realization that we – as God’s people in America – must come to terms with the white supremacy that lives in our Church. We – as white Lutherans – must own our complicity in racism over the years, and then repent of that sin.

And if you think we are NOT caught up in a system that displaces people of color, just look at the statistics: our denomination, by percentages, is THE whitest church in America.

Being caught up in the system of white supremacy is not just about committing OVERT acts of racism...but living in a system of white supremacy includes things like bias.

What is BIAS: When we, as white people, shy away from people of color, from having members and ministers of color in our congregations...that is bias.

Do we choose to associate “Good” with someone being WHITE? And associate “Bad” with people of color? Do we – as white Lutherans – choose to DEFEND our system? Or do we listen? Do we engage in the work of dismantling racism, both in the church and in our communities?

The GOSPEL is always rooted in life, in relationships, and when we implicitly discount people of color to be fellow church members, or church leaders, we are to repent of this and see that the Gospel gift is indeed open to ALL people.

Much of the history of the American church is clouded with white supremacy, but we – today – can do something about that. We can be aware, we can listen, we can seek God’s direction in being a people that is diverse and made WHOLE, thanks to the GOSPEL that draws us together

Jesus promises that the circle of those called to steward the Gospel is not closed, but is an ever-widening circle! God is giving us lots of people to guide us and lead us into repentance and into forgiveness. We simply are called to embrace those whom the Spirit leads to us.

The Gospel can look like God sending new prophets into our midst - prophets of all colors, who will challenge us to think about what the GOSPEL looks like in our place and in our time

As a leader in the Southeastern Synod, I am engaged in the process of listening to people of color, engaged in racial diversity training. And I am actively looking for the GOSPEL in the midst of it all, and repenting for my own implicit biases.

The Gospel is there to guide me and shape me when I realize my faults and mistakes. I have much work to do in this arena of my personal and professional life. I have much work to do and I enter with an open mind and heart. I continue to read books and articles and engage in discussions, so that my viewpoint can be stretched, so that I can be broken and the Gospel can equip my soul with fresh eyes and a fresh heart!

Only the Creator owns everything and we, too, are simply tenants leasing out the talents God has granted to be used for the greater good in the kingdom.

That is the GOSPEL: that no matter where people come from, what color their skin is, whatever their gender expression or orientation, the GOSPEL is a gift for ALL people.

May you be changed this day, to understand that the Gospel is about us being given a life-giving gift and following the call to share this gift with others.

We have TODAY.

We have NOW.

TODAY is a gift.

What will YOU...what will WE do with this gift?

Jesus welcomes all kinds of faithful disciples from all walks of life to carry forth the mission of the church!!!

Will you be open to that gift?

I hope so.

Amen.