

Pentecost 17, September 27, 2020 (Mt 21:23-32; Ezek 18:1-4, 25-32; Php 2:1-13)

In the Hebrew scriptures—what we call the *Old Testament*—the *vineyard* is often used to represent the nation of Israel, God’s chosen people. Those who heard Jesus speak to the chief priests and the elders would have known that.

They would have recognized that the father in today’s story represented *God*. They would have understood that “working in the vineyard” meant *being about God’s business*. And they would have wondered mightily at the two sons, both of whom “changed their minds”—repented.

In a few short weeks St. John will celebrate *Affirmation of Baptism*, which we call *Confirmation*. At the end of that rite I’ll ask the Confirmands a series of questions from the hymnal. These express the Lutheran interpretation of what it means to live a Christ-like life. Think about how *you* would answer.

Do you intend to continue in the covenant God made with you in Holy Baptism?

To live among God’s faithful people?

To hear his Word and share in his supper?

For most of us those first two questions would be easy “yeses.” But how about the next one: *Do you intend to proclaim the good news of God in Christ through word and deed?* We Lutherans, God’s *frozen chosen*, don’t usually embrace that sort of evangelism.

Then, *do you intend to serve all people, following the example of our Lord Jesus?* Again, that’s not exactly in our comfort zone. It sounds too much like *evangelism*—though I know several people in this congregation who do this faithfully and often.

But the last question is the real sticking point: *Do you intend to strive for justice and peace in all the earth?*

“*Peace on earth, good will to all*” is what the angels sang at Jesus’ birth—well, those are the words in the Christmas carol. But *peace* seems to be an ever-rarer commodity nowadays.

Everywhere we look there are horror stories of wars and rumors of wars, and peaceful protests which end up in violence. And underlying these are usually an absence of **justice** and the enduring pain caused by centuries of inequality and lack of opportunities for change.

Our country is hungry for justice. The word *justice* is used 165 times in the Bible! Many phrases are repeated in scripture; that’s an indication we should pay attention to them.

Do you remember one of my favorites? “*Care for the widow, the --- orphan, and the --- stranger, or alien, in your midst.*” From the very beginning God’s love and provision have been for *all* people, *especially* those least able to provide for their own needs.

Listen to Moses in Deuteronomy, the 10th chapter: *For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, who is not partial and takes no bribe, who executes **justice** for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing. You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt* (Deut 10:17-18 NRSV). – The *widow, the orphan, and the alien* are the ones most in need of justice, because they have no one to speak up for them, and no leverage!

Hear Psalm 72, the first 2 verses: *Give the king your **justice**, O God, and your righteousness to a king’s son. May he judge your people with righteousness, and your poor with **justice*** (Ps 72:1-2).

Psalm 83: *How long will you judge unjustly and show partiality to the wicked? Give **justice** to the weak and the orphan; maintain the right of the lowly and the destitute. Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked* (Ps 83:2-4).

From Proverbs: *The evil do not understand **justice**, but those who seek the Lord understand it completely (Prov 28:5).*

From Isaiah: *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! (Isa 5:7).*

And again from Isaiah; God says: *Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of **injustice**, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share you bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil, if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday (Isa 58:6-7a, 9b-10).*

Then there's Amos; the Lord speaks through the prophet: *I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon. Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. **But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream** (Amos 5:21-24).*

And finally, the Lord has challenged the Prophet Micah to come up with a plan for faithful living; Micah responds: *With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with yearling calves? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousand rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? No. And what does the Lord require of you but to do **justice**, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God? (Micah 6:6-8).*

St. John/St. Stephen is a congregation of the ELCA—*Evangelical* Lutheran Church in America. *Evangelism* is sharing the good news that **God so loved the world, he gave his only Son, so that everyone—everyone—who believes in him may not perish, but may have eternal life.**

Our commitment in the Affirmation of Baptism draws us back to the words of the *Lutheran Book of Worship/Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, and the promises we made when we were confirmed, which included *striving for justice and peace in all the earth.*

Just six weeks from this Tuesday almost all American citizens will vote to elect a President for the next 4 years. Will you strive for **justice** and **peace** in this one nation under God? Will you speak up for those who have no voice, no advocate, no mentor? I ask you this in Jesus' name.