

-Chicago: the Windy City. It's also known as the Gun City. There were more than 4,000 shooting victims in Chicago in 2016, a 61% increase from 2015. Most of these were due to a significant rise of gun homicides from gang activity. This, along with deep problems in the Chicago Police Department, has created a deep sense of fear nationwide and especially in local communities within Chicago.

-Dr. Gary Slutkin, an infectious disease doctor working at the University of Illinois Public School of Health found an interesting parallel between gun violence and infectious diseases. "Basically", he describes, "one of the main predictors of gun violence was if there was another major event that happened before it. This is exactly the way an infectious disease behaves around the world. So in other words looking at mass spread of gun violence across the United States is very similar to looking at the spread of an infectious disease." Thus, Dr. Slutkin formed a group called Cure Violence in Chicago. The pillars of this organization are what Slutkin refers to as "healthcare workers" also known as Violence Interrupters. Violence Interrupters are a gang of community mediators, on call and walking the streets 24/7 in order to help work through small conflicts before the guns get pulled. When small conflicts can be mostly mediated in the community, Slutkin says, it prevents the disease of gun violence from blowing up.

-Slutkin's efforts seem to be working. A National Institute of Justice funded evaluation led by Northwestern University showed statistically significant results across all seven Chicago communities Cure Violence operates in currently, reductions in shootings and killings of 41% to 73%

-I bring up the story of Cure Violence in light of a tragedy I know we are all still reeling from: one week ago today a shooter with more than 20 semi automatic rifles mowing down a crowd of concert goers in Las Vegas, killing 59 and wounding hundreds more. A tragedy that, as one college student said to me at an Emmaus Campus Ministry event this past week: "how do we respond to this continuing bloodshed?" How do we respond?

-Maybe this parable of Jesus of the Vineyard Tenants can shed some light. This parable is a violent one in its own right. Tenants of a vineyard who have a massive misunderstanding of squatter's rights and who do anything, even kill people, in order to keep their place.

-One must be careful of this story because I think it has traditionally been interpreted in ways that may or may not be very helpful.

-There is, like many of Jesus' parables, a common interpretation which many have viewed this story from. It can go like this: Vineyard owner=God. Tenants=Jewish leaders. Son=Jesus. The Jewish leaders were the evil tenants, and the fruit of the harvest must be taken from them, and given to 'other tenants: namely, the Church. So, thus, in this reading, we can comfortably and easily put ourselves in the role of 'other

tenants,' enjoying the fruit of the harvest (eternal life) and God punishing the Jewish leadership (and maybe even the Jewish people) for messing things up. Done.

-What a nice, comfy, reading for us Christians. If only, from my perspective, if it were true. I always have great suspicion of scripture interpretations which make it sound like we are the "true heirs" and can sit back in our lazy boys and let eternal life just come on in. That's not where I believe the gospel message lies nor is it in line with the basic understanding of God's love for all creation.

-Another way to read this parable is through the lens of the Psalm that Jesus quotes, Psalm 118 : "the stone that the builders rejected is now the cornerstone." You see, Matthew's community lived in a time of great violence and faced the horrible problem of picking up the pieces after the Roman army came to Jerusalem and destroyed the Temple. Faced with the destruction of the Temple, the Matthean community, like most Jewish communities, was looking for blame. Blame that could be heaped on the religious leaders or on those that caused the rebellion.

-Jesus offers a different way and something new entirely. The vineyard itself is no longer important. Blame for destruction of Temple is pointless. The vineyard is not Israel, but the Kingdom of God (which as Jesus says: is God's action and vision for the world), that is opened up to other tenants. Tenants who do not bear and share fruit are rejected and the kingdom or vineyard is given to those who do bear and share good fruit (no matter if you are Jewish, Christian, or other). Here is what is important for us in seeing the vineyard as the broader Kingdom of God: the rules of engagement change. Following 3 servants being sent away in the midst of escalating violence, we would expect the Vineyard owner to "bring wrath" upon the wicked tenants, but the owner instead chooses vulnerability: he sends his son, unarmed. For me, the story makes it clear that there is no room for violence in the Kingdom of God. Violence only leads to violence and the purpose of the vineyard owner's action is to show a 3rd way.

-In sending his son, the vineyard owner hopes to remind the tenants of their humanity and empathy that they might feel shame in the presence of vulnerability.

-This is what our gun paranoid society, I believe, needs to hear. This is what maybe we need to hear. How do we respond to violence with humanity?

-One of the Violence Interrupters from Cure Violence was a woman who lost her own daughter to gun violence. From walking the streets, she knew many of the competing gang leaders in her neighborhood and would often give them support and cookies or baked goods when things were bleak (she worked in a bake shop). In 2015, two of the major gangs were on the brink of a gang war and not even the Chicago Police mediators felt they could stop it. One evening, this woman called the two gangs together. With cookies on the table, she was able to hash out a peace agreement that has lasted over two years. An end to violence happening with the exchange of cookies.

-St. Francis of Assisi said: "A SINGLE SUNBEAM IS ENOUGH TO DRIVE AWAY MANY SHADOWS." One of the many blessings of our pets and animals is that they keep us human. They give us that sunbeam. Whether they wake us up in the morning, get excited for a walk, curl up with us on the couch, animals (especially pets) can bring out in us humanity and humility.

-So maybe on this Blessing of the Animals Sunday, we can look to our animals to help us keep our humanity in light of such a catastrophic world.

-Yes there needs to be changes to gun laws, to violence that our kids are witnessing, to mental health care, to a lack of future for many neighborhoods overcome by guns, to our society's love affair with military weapons. But if we don't take the vineyard owner's actions of humility and humanness, we become the tenants who only use hatred and violence to get their way.

-May God walk with us and with all creatures with love and grace. Amen.