

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost A

Isaiah 5:1-7

Psalm 80:7-15

Philippians 3:4b-14

Matthew 21:33-46

One of my all-time favorite movies is the 1980 classic “The Blues Brothers”, starring Dan Aykroyd and the late John Belushi. I was raised a Chicago boy, so the movie practically flows through my veins.

The movie follows the story of “Joliet” Jake and Elwood Blues, the “Blues Brothers”, as they seek to save their childhood home from foreclosure. The boys were raised in a Catholic orphanage under the strict watch of Sister Mary Stigmata, whom everyone calls the “Penguin”. She tried her hardest to teach them to lead moral and upright lives, but apparently, her lessons never stuck. When the boys come to visit her, she claims that “the two young boys I taught to believe the Ten Commandments have come back to me with filthy mouths, and bad attitudes.”

Undeterred by the Penguin’s warnings, Elwood is confident that the two brothers will raise the \$5000 in property taxes that the orphanage needs because they are on a “mission from God.”

The brothers round up the members of their old band, the “Blues Brothers’ Show Band and Revue”, and set off in the new Bluesmobile to earn the money—but never quite legitimately.

Along the way, getting into trouble, of course, they earn the wrath of the Illinois State Police, another band, a mystery woman who keeps trying to kill them, and of course, the Illinois Nazis.

Yet through it all, Elwood is confident that they will still be able to make enough money to save the orphanage. After all, they are on a “mission from God.” Through blackmail they even manage to land a gig that earns them more than enough to pay the orphanage’s property taxes.

In the film’s climactic chase scene, the Blues Brothers race 106 miles to Chicago with a full tank of gas, half a pack of cigarettes, in the dark, while wearing sunglasses. After causing a massive police car pileup, they race into the city, and

Kenneth G Ranos - First Evangelical Lutheran Church, Muskegon, MI – Pentecost 16 A – 10/01-

02/2011

wouldn't you know it, they actually get the money to the Cook County Assessor's office in time and save the orphanage.

After which they are immediately arrested and handcuffed by the combined forces of the Illinois State Police, the Chicago Police, the SWAT team, and the National Guard.

The Penguin was right in her warnings—I can imagine her, like in Isaiah this morning, wondering, “what more was there to do... that I had not done?” She raised the Blues Brothers, but instead of becoming good Catholic men, they turned out to be thieves, blackmailers, extortionists, and all around bums. But they still believed things would work out because they were “on a mission from God.”

God's point of view then is easy to see in our readings for this morning. In both the reading from Isaiah and the reading from Matthew, God's preparations in the world are compared to a vineyard. All of the proper preparations are made:

A good fertile hill is chosen,
The soil is extensively prepared,
Only the very best vines are planted.
A wall and watchtower are built to keep it safe,
Even an expensive winepress is built,
In anticipation of the coming good harvest.

There really wasn't anything more God could do to prepare the vineyard for a good harvest.

In Matthew, this grand undertaking is lent to a few chosen farmers, who need only to take care of it and give a portion of the good fruits back to the owner. There is nothing odd in this request—the arrangement was actually quite common, and still occurs around the world to this day.

Things start to get off track though when the farmers react violently to those sent to collect what the owner is rightly owed. Who knows why they think that by killing all of the owner's slaves and then his son they will then inherit the vineyard.

It's absurd. It's ridiculous. But they take for granted that this is their vineyard to do with as they please. It's a gross injustice that they are committing against the owner.

Kenneth G Ranos - First Evangelical Lutheran Church, Muskegon, MI – Pentecost 16 A – 10/01-02/2011

And yet as I laugh and scoff at the stupidity of the farmers, I can't help but remember why Jesus told the parable in the first place. Jesus is quite clever in his telling of the story.

The story enrages the Pharisees, who pronounce their judgment on the wicked farmers.

And in the process, they pronounce that same judgment on themselves.

They had been given charge over God's vineyard, and in time, came to believe themselves the sole owners.

They believed that they had earned the right to take the vineyard away from God, who put all of that effort into it.

They believed that if they could silence those who claimed to speak for God (and honestly, who believes those people anyway) then there would be no more challenges to their ownership of what God had given them.

They were "on a mission from God."

Put those miserable wretches to death! they say. And the finger turns right back around on them.

So even as I too pass judgment on these clearly corrupt, evil farmers, I have to stop and wonder... am I condemning myself?

Well, yes, I am. Studying the Bible has really forced me to be honest with myself. I do a lot of stupid things in life. We all do. Is a single one of us perfect? No, of course not. Heck, if *Paul* wasn't perfect, I *know* I'm not. We live by the grace of God.

It's very easy for us to take that grace of God for granted. When this country was founded, it believed that it had a "Manifest Destiny". This land was our land, from sea to shining sea, no matter who else was in the way.

A lot of horrible atrocities were committed in the name of God, because we believed it was our right. This was our vineyard to do with as we pleased, our mission, and "God bless America!"

And today, we still perpetuate injustice around the world through war and the refusal to stand up for justice.

We are oblivious to our warped view of the world.
A quote I read earlier this week says:

“If this is going to be a Christian nation that doesn’t help the poor, either we have to pretend that Jesus was just as selfish as we are, or we’ve got to admit that Jesus commanded us to love the poor and serve the needy without condition and then admit that we just don’t want to do it.”

We still have a long way to go, but in that respect, we aren’t much different than the rest of humanity.

Are we without hope? Are we destined to be a vineyard trampled and overgrown?

The more I read the lessons for this week, the more confused I became. The loss of the vineyard seemed total, absolute, driven by God’s wrath.

The protective hedge is removed.
The walls are broken down.
The vineyard is left to grow over.
The weeds grow and choke the vines with thorns.
Even the rain refuses to fall.
The Pharisees rightly condemn the wicked tenants to death.

But wait... the *Pharisees* condemn the farmers to death.

If I was the owner of this vineyard, and the tenants beat *my* slaves, you can bet that, being as rich as I am, a nice number of mercenaries would suddenly find themselves employed.

I would have sent armed men to the tenants and forced them to give me what belonged to me—resistance would be met with swift punishment. I would have acted exactly as the Pharisees predicted.

Kenneth G Ranos - First Evangelical Lutheran Church, Muskegon, MI – Pentecost 16 A – 10/01-02/2011

Instead, we have a very peculiar owner in this story. When the first slaves are beaten and killed, *he gives the farmers another chance.*

And again, when those slaves are killed, he gives them *another chance.*

When the vineyard in Isaiah produces sour grapes, God removes the vineyard's protection, but takes no direct action against the vines, the people of Israel and Judah.

The psalm writer this morning does not hope in vain when he asks God to “have regard for this vine.” There is still hope for the vine and the vineyard.

God keeps trying. God doesn't give up.

Even when the old building falls down, a new cornerstone is laid and a new house is built.

If there was one truth about the Bible that I wish I could get across to everyone I meet, it's that throughout all of history, God wants *desperately* to be in a relationship with us. God **loves**. Which also means that God **hurts**. We **hurt** God.

Yet every time—*every* time that we do something to break God's heart, God comes back for us.

God cries when we do nothing about injustice in our world.

God mourns when we oppress our neighbors.

God weeps when we don't even acknowledge that what we do is so painful.

And every time, God musters up the strength to take us back when we finally realize what we've done. That is the love of God. That's why our liturgy includes the Confession and Forgiveness.

Knowing how much God has done for us and sacrificed for us, even God's own *son*, how can we not take a stand and say, “No. This is wrong. God loves me too much to keep doing this.”

And so we in turn become like the slaves sent to the vineyard—called to be prophetic voices against violence and injustice. We aren't perfect—not even Paul. But when we know how much we are loved and treasured, we find the strength to act because of it. “We love because he first loved us.”

We have our mission. The wall has been built. The wine vat carved. The vines planted. We have been given a vineyard.

What will we grow with it?