

OCTOBER 8, 2017

Twenty-seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time

READING 1 IS 5:1-7

RESPONSORIAL PSALM PS 80:9, 12, 13-14, 15-16, 19-20

R. (Is 5:7a) **The vineyard of the Lord is the house of Israel.**

READING 2 PHIL 4:6-9

Brothers and sisters: Have no anxiety at all, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, make your requests known to God. Then the peace of God that surpasses all understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing what you have learned and received and heard and seen in me. Then the God of peace will be with you.

GOSPEL MT 21:33-43

HOMILY:

A chill came over the world this week . . . Las Vegas. The details of the chill are fairly well-known now: At about 10:08 p.m. Sunday, the Route 91 Harvest festival, an outdoor country music concert, was interrupted by the sound of gunfire. A single gunman fired on the crowd of about 22,000 people from the 32nd floor of the Mandalay Bay Resort and Casino, while Country music singer Jason Aldean was performing. The gunshots lasted for 10 to 15 minutes. Twenty-three weapons were found in the hotel room, including multiple rifles, and some had scopes on them, authorities said. 59 people have died as a result, with 100's others injured, and this is just physically. Too many to be counted are those who have suffered emotional trauma. Indeed, a chill has settled over the nation . . . for a while . . . causing us to question the goodness of humanity, our society, and the God who is the creator of it all. A frustrating search of a "motive" for this horror has so far come up empty. Yet . . . what is a motive? Literally, a motive is what moves us to action. But, in the end, do the families of victims really care what motivated this evil? The fact: a person acted, seemingly with great deliberation, to assail and destroy. What are we to make of this?

Well, as it turns out, we don't need to travel to Vegas to witness a destructive attack on the innocent. This week, I went to HyVee to pick up a few items. I don't know why I went at 6:30 pm—it's a crowded time, but it was the only hour that worked. After gathering up what was needed, I headed for the checkout—where the perpetual jockeying for "the shortest line" was, as always, underway. I chose wrong. Ahead of me was a shopper who was clearly irate. It was something about how she had purchased some Chinese take-out, but the folks there refused to put the Chicken Kung Pao in a bag. Apparently, this was a truly vexing, moral outrage that required abusive language at anyone who could be deemed responsible. Our checker, we'll call her "Elizabeth," was trying to be as patient as she could, but it was not being received. This anger flowed into the tense moment when the cash register did not seem to accept the woman's check. While the shopper berated the checker for not knowing how to run the cash register, "Elizabeth" got more and more flustered. She began to call for help, only to receive some exaggerated "sighs" and mutterings of disgust. At this moment, the priest in line (and dressed like one!) noticed on Elizabeth's name badge, under the cheery HyVee message, "How may I help you?",

something like, “serving you since 2017.” She was a newbie. As the shopper became more angry that Elizabeth needed to call for help,” I gently whispered to the shopper, “she’s new and needs some help,” to which the shopper, finally noticing a priest (and others) in line behind her, said, “oh, I see.” Though there was no apology forthcoming from the shopper, that simple intervention led to the end verbal assault and she stopped “firing” her soul-killing insults at this defenseless young woman. But the damage was done.

How did the Las Vegas shooter get to that point? How did the “HyVee shooter” get to that point? Can we not accept the fact that what happened in each of these “assaults” was a gradual procession to that point? The Las Vegas shooter was not that way when he was a small child, the pride of his mother’s eye. And the “HyVee” shooter was not that way, verbally abusive, when she was a little girl. Instead, in each case, vice slowly overtook virtue—choice piling upon choice, until 59 people were dead and over 500 more injured in Las Vegas, and in the HyVee, one soul assaulted and questioning her beauty and dignity as one created in God’s image, not to mention the witnesses who were shaken by this abusiveness. Maybe it was choices of the persons who finally inflicted violence upon innocents; maybe the inflictors had been the victim of choices inflicted on them. Whatever the case, in Las Vegas or HyVee, these acts of violence were long in the making, one choice at a time. With the magnitude of the horror of the Las Vegas shooting, some might be tempted to accuse me of making light of it by comparing it to what I have called the “HyVee shooting.” But . . . though I can do nothing about what happened in Las Vegas, I can do everything about what happens in Waterloo IA, in the HyVee and everywhere else, to renounce violence against another and myself to choose kindness and mercy.

Look at the second reading, which details how to pile up virtue over vice. There, St. Paul tells us, along with the new believers in Philippi, in now northern Greece, how to live: “Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing what you have learned and received and heard and seen in me. Then the God of peace will be with you.” He lists a catalog of virtues: repeated, practiced behaviors and choices of how we must treat one another. When we choose honor, purity, truth, loveliness, and graciousness over a long period, our world is a better place. This is what is demanded of us by the name of Christian. We simply may not assault and abuse others, with guns (heaven forbid!) or words.

The bitter, good news is that, created in God’s image, we have been given the precious gift of free will—but not free will to do as our passions judge, but, if it is part of God’s image, it is a freedom to love. This takes practice, practicing the graciousness and love demanded of the Christian, one free choice after another. We must not abandon our responsibility to act with charity!

Yes, a chill came over the world in Las Vegas last week. But . . . warmth breaks out here, at this altar, where we are equipped with love to go and choose the loving acts that warm the world—and the stakes are high! To take the warmth of God’s love known here and spread it—to our families, our workplaces, HyVee, wherever it is needed, is what the chilly world hungers for. Into this chill, Pope Francis has said, “A little bit of mercy makes the world less cold and more just.” What are we to do in the face of such evil, which chills the world in big ways in Las Vegas to hundreds of souls and to one soul in particular at the HyVee in Waterloo IA? We are to do MERCY. Enough abusing each other, enough firing shots at each other—at home, on the road, in the grocery store. Enough! Let’s go make the world less cold and more merciful. That’s what we can do—that’s what we must do.