

7 April 2019
Lent 5

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

Jesu Juva

“The Victory of Love”

Text: Luke 20:9-20; Philippians 3:4b-14; Isaiah 43:16-21

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

People in love often do goofy things, especially when that love is new or just beginning.

So by all accounts, God must really love you! Because the landowner in the parable Jesus tells today, the figure who represents God the Father, is goofy. And maybe a bit beyond that.

Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice, shame on me. But what about when it goes more than that? How many times, how many servants, were sent? And each time, they were abused, treated shamefully, wounded, and killed. And still, the owner sent them. *Goofy.*

And then he sent his son. In what universe does *that* make sense? What could have possibly given him the idea that they would do *anything* to his son other than what they had done to his servants? It must be love. Not that God the Father doesn't love His Son - He most certainly does. The Scriptures make that abundantly clear. But He loves you. More than you know.

In contrast to that love is the attitude of the tenants. They were selfish, surely, wanting the entire vineyard, all that belonged to the landowner, for themselves. But it went beyond that. Selfishness then grew into hatred which grew into bitterness which grew into anger.

We could say that what they did was goofy too - but goofiness born not of love, but of sin. They had a pretty good arrangement, after all, as tenant farmers. They got to live on the land and work it and keep most of what they produced - they had only to give the owner his share. Perhaps it was 10% or 20% - whatever they had agreed upon. But this they did not want to do. They wanted it all for themselves. And so in the end, to this end, they killed the landowner's son. Were they pleased with themselves after they did that?

Jesus tells them what will happen. The time will come when those wicked tenants will be thrown out and the vineyard given to others.

Surely not! the people responded. What a horrible story! May we never see such a thing,

such evil and punishment. Yet it was unfolding right before their eyes.

The scribes and the chief priests got that. *They perceived that Jesus had told this parable against them.* But it emboldened them. It made them like the tenants in the parable - all the more determined to get rid of the son so the inheritance could be theirs. And so soon, very soon now, Jesus would be thrown out and killed. *The stone the builders rejected would become the cornerstone.* It had been prophesied, and every prophecy of God happens.

What else could the landowner have done? He could have gone in there with an army after the first or second servant was mistreated and wiped out those tenants, and maybe his vineyard, too. But would that have been a victory? Revenge, yes. But victory?

Instead, the owner gives them every chance, and then some. Time after time. The point? A victory not of might, but of love. And the sending of His Son is the ultimate sign of that love.

People often ask why God doesn't just wipe out sin; why does He let it be and exist in this world? Well, God could have wiped it out. From the very beginning to now, He could have. Easily. Either done it Himself or sent in His legion army of angels to do the job for Him. But to what end? Then where would we be? Would that be a victory? Revenge, yes. But victory?

Because the truth is, you can't change a sinner by force. God could certainly round us all up with a whip or sword or worse, but all He would have is a rebellious, unhappy herd of cattle or slaves. Nothing really would have changed.

But that's not what He wants. Your Father in heaven doesn't want a herd of people driven by force or fear - He wants a family. Free sons and daughters dwelling with Him in love. Force can't do that. Only love can.

Love that turns the other cheek. Love like the landowner showed.

For if someone strikes you with his fist or tongue and you strike back, you have your revenge, but you really have been defeated by him. His anger has won and that anger is now double. But if he strikes you and you do not retaliate and get your revenge, then his anger remains alone and a bit uncomfortable. By not returning evil for evil, anger for anger, hate for hate; by not retaliating, is taken the first step toward the victory of love; the victory of cleansing the heart of malice; the victory of making him your friend. And the sin that set us against one another is overcome.

For only love can overcome sin. But that often means suffering. For the Father, it meant sending His Son. For the Son, it meant Calvary. But the result? Victory. Sinners made sons and daughters of God.

That's what your Father in heaven wants. And so His love for you. His goofy love for you.

But refuse that love . . . then you have no cornerstone upon which you are building your own little kingdom, and it will fall. It will not last. You will not last. And you will wind up only broken and crushed by that stone. Oh, maybe you and your kingdom will look good and feel good for a bit, but in the end, every Word of God, every prophecy of God, comes true. And if you're not built on that stone, that cornerstone, then you will be broken and crushed by it. As finally the wicked tenants were.

But that's not what your Father in heaven wants. He's not about revenge, He wants to love. And He does. Abundantly. Lavishly.

And He loves you. He has given you your life and all that you have. As we confess in the Small Catechism, *He richly and daily provides all that I need to support this body and life*. And all this not because you deserve it, but in love. Goofy love for you.

But He would like some fruit back. The fruit of good works, the fruits of faith, in your life. He sends servants to preach this to you, encourage this in you. He sends His Spirit to work this in you. So . . . ? Is there fruit? In your life, in your words, in your thoughts, in your heart?

If the answer is no, and surely the answer is either that or: not enough! Take comfort in the fact that the army is not coming for you, for revenge, to destroy you. His Son is coming to love you. To give His life for you. To give His life to you. Because you can't change a sinner by force, only by love. And so His love you have. His Body and Blood poured out for you. His forgiveness for you. His Baptism adopting you into His family.

And yes, you can reject all this, reject His love. But as with the tenants, that is goofy - the goofiness not of love, but of sin. For rejecting His love you do not get more, but far, far less.

But loved by God, you are loved into His family, into the Church which is built upon Jesus as the cornerstone - a building which will not, cannot, fall. It may not always look that way, as it surely didn't when Jesus was hanging on the cross. But believe what you hear, not what you see. For even while hanging on the cross, Jesus was the cornerstone, speaking God's Word of love and forgiveness and hope in the face of the tenants' hatred and bitterness and anger. And the victory belonged to love, not hate. To life, not death.

That's what changed the apostle Paul, to count everything that he had, everything that he had accomplished in life - which was considerable - as *loss*, as *rubbish*. For he now knew something far greater: the love of Christ. So for him there was no going back, there was only forgetting the past - because Christ had forgiven his past and all his past sins. Now

was only forward, to the love of Christ, in the love of Christ.

And this is the ***new thing*** Isaiah spoke of - which is really not new at all, but new to us. To us steeped in the ways of the world, the ways of sin and revenge and force. Maybe we don't always perceive it, given the dullness of our minds and the hardness of our hearts. But still the Lord is loving you, to ***make a way in the wilderness*** of this world, ***a river in the desert*** of sin, that you drink deeply of His forgiveness and be refreshed by His love.

Is such love for us sinners goofy? Maybe. But if so, we could use a lot more goofiness in this world and life. The goofy love that we sang of just before the sermon:

*My song is love unknown, My Savior's love to me,
Love to the loveless shown That they might lovely be* (LSB #430).

So maybe it's not so goofy after all, but the way things *should* be. The way they are in the Church, though we are still sinners in need of forgiveness. The way they will be when Jesus comes again. When all sin is banished and there is only love. *My Savior's love to me*, and our love to Him and to one another. Love born of love. Life born of life.

So today we enter Passiontide - the last two weeks of this Lenten season. And though the cross is now veiled, the love of God shines forth even more. The love of the cross. The victory of love.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

(Some thoughts and phrases in this sermon from a sermon by Norman Nagel in Selected Sermons of Norman Nagel, p. 99-101.)