

**Mount Hollywood United Church of Christ – Los Angeles**  
**Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost – October 8, 2017**  
**Rev. Anne G. Cohen, Minister**

**Matthew 21:33-46 (NRSV) and Thomas 65 (The Five Gospels)**

**FOR REFLECTION**

**“Life is not a problem to be solved, but a reality to be experienced.”**

- Soren Kierkegaard, Danish Philosopher (1813-1855)

**Dealing with Reality**

We have two versions of an ancient story in front of us. One was written 20 years after Jesus died, the other written at least 55 years after he died. What differences do you see in the two texts?

- Matthew is longer
- Matthew is more complicated, more people involved and killed
- Matthew adds an “explanation” – turning parable into allegory

The story in Thomas is closer to the oral form – simpler, fewer details. It ends with the crime. No explanation. Tenant farmers were common in Galilee in Jesus’ lifetime. Their situations were difficult – comparable to Black tenant farmers in the American South during Jim Crow. They did the work, the owners benefitted – and cheated the workers as much as possible.

Killing the apparent heir to the land was one-way tenant farmers could have taken possession of their lives and work product. Thomas’ version allows the listener to decide for themselves whether or not this act is justified – whether or not the system should change in order to avoid such outcomes.

The parable describes an economic situation as understood by Jesus in his time. This was REALITY.

55 years after Jesus died, there is a community of followers that has been denounced and separated from Orthodox Judaism. They use a story Jesus told as a way to denounce orthodoxy in return, accuse them of the murder of G-d’s son and promise themselves that G-d will punish those who stole the heir’s (Jesus’) inheritance. That’s not REALITY. That is taking a description of reality and twisting the meaning to meet

one's own agenda. Christians are really good at this. Human beings are really good at this.

News outlets and social media today form a tsunami of descriptions of reality - narratives twisted to meet an agenda. And our only salvation is to acknowledge that fact, acknowledge our own participation in that phenomenon – and begin to DEAL WITH REALITY.

This is difficult for us as humans as we are innately self-centered. We are built for survival and self-interest is necessary for survival. We feed and shelter ourselves, protect ourselves from harm, meet our own needs. Interest in others originated in our biological urge to procreate and our mammalian desire to protect our young. The building of community evolved out of an understanding that we survive more easily and more fruitfully if we work together, live together, protect each other.

As with any natural condition, if it is out of balance, it becomes a problem. Self-interest that is never modified by experience, matured or taught to value the Common Good – becomes self-absorption. There is even a biological component – making some humans unable to care for anyone but themselves. Depending on the magnitude of the disorder, these people may be referred to as naval-gazers, narcissists or sociopaths. Recently our president has been described as suffering from solipsism.

<http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/03/24/trump-narcissim-trancendental-solopsim-opportunity-cost-media-cycle-greatness-china/>

So, of course I looked it up.

Solipsism: a theory holding that the self can know nothing but its own modifications and that the self is the only existent thing; also extreme egocentrism an ego-driven selfishness or self-indulgence...

[It comes from the] Latin: *solus* alone + *ipse* self

<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/solipsism>

Our political system, set up for the Common Good, seems to be filled these days with solipsistic personalities – hell-bent on passing laws for their own gain rather than shoring up the public safety net. To justify this, reality must be reorganized to fit a narrative designed to make others think it is in their own interest to support these laws.

This narrative leads people to vote against their own interests – without understanding the ploy. It is a solipsistic hamster wheel that necessitates denial of such realities as climate change, the deadly consequences of unregulated gun ownership, the backlash that inevitably follows economic injustice and the repeated denial of the civil rights of certain populations.

An article in the Daily News on October 3<sup>rd</sup> declared:

Mass shootings are now a part of the fabric of America.

Is this a false narrative or is this reality? That proclamation is followed by statistics:

Since the 2012 Sandy Hook Elementary School massacre, the U.S. has seen 1,518 acts of gun violence in which at least four people were wounded or killed, according to the Gun Violence Archive website. **That's nearly one mass shooting a day for the 1,754 days since the shocking slaughter of the Connecticut kids.**

The crimes claimed the lives of 1,715 people and wounded more than 6,000 others — **all while Congress has failed to enact a single piece of significant gun legislation.**

<http://www.nydailynews.com/news/national/1-700-dead-mass-shooting-day-sandy-hook-article-1.3539717>

So, the question that addresses our current reality is not, “How can we convince congress to pass gun control laws?” The question is really, “How can we protect ourselves from armed sociopaths?”

Slate.com offers another explanation or narrative for the rise in mass shootings beyond mental illness:

In the 1970s about half of Americans had a gun, and it was almost always just a gun, one on average. Today only about a quarter of Americans own guns—but the average owner has three or four. **Fewer than 8 million people, only 3 percent of all American adults, own roughly half the guns.** Members of that tiny minority of superenthusiasts own an average of 17 guns apiece. (These data come from NORC at the University of Chicago's 2015 General Social Survey, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's 2011 survey, the Congressional Research Service, the Federal Reserve, research by Florida State University criminologist Gary Kleck, and a survey conducted in 2015 by Harvard and Northeastern University researchers.)

Spectacular mass killings happen in America far more often than anywhere else, and not just because we make massacre-perfect weapons so easy to buy. **Such killers are also engaged in role play and are motivated by our besetting national dream of overnight fame. The experts say that most mass killers are not psychotics or paranoid schizophrenics entirely in the throes of clinical delusion; rather, they're citizens of Fantasyland, unhappy people with flaws and failures they blame on others, the system, the elitists, the world.** They worry those resentments into sensational fantasies of paramilitary vengeance, and they know that acting out those fantasies will make a big splash and force the rest of us to pay attention to them for the first time.

<https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2017/10/fantasyland-book-excerpt-the-nra-won-the-gun-rights-debate-and-made-americans-fear-their-own-government.html>

How living in Fantasyland is different from solipsism or narcissism I'm not sure. But this does put some heavy blame on our culture of seeking fame and fortune through the media – our culture of cinematic storytelling that glorifies violent revenge – a national narrative of the strength of the individual vs. the strength of community organizing.

In 1996, the [Australian] government banned some types of guns, instituted a buyback program and imposed stricter licensing and registration requirements. Gun ownership rates in Australia declined from 7 percent to 5 percent. Another law in 2002 tightened restrictions a bit more, restricting caliber, barrel length and capacity for sport shooting handguns.

Australian crime statistics show a marked decrease in homicides since the gun law change.

<http://www.factcheck.org/2009/05/gun-control-in-australia/>

Non-indigenous Australian culture, founded as penal colony with a similar emphasis on individualism, reduced accessibility to weaponry and has fewer homicides, mass or otherwise. That is REALITY. America lives in a FANTASYLAND that allows for the mass murder that happened last Sunday in Las Vegas. REALITY may bite – but we have to deal with it.

Our federal government in its current manifestation will not be dealing with it. Until we can figure out how to change the nature of our congress and administration – which must be done but will take YEARS – how will we protect ourselves from the inevitability of mass shootings which, apparently, are “now a part of the fabric of America”???

Even Jesus knew that the reality of socio-economic injustice under Roman rule meant that there would be violent backlash. So, he told a story that asked people to look at that reality and decide what to do. Yes, throwing off Roman rule needed to happen as would probably involve violence. But in the meantime, what could people do?

Looking REALITY squarely in the face, what can we do?  
What, in G-d’s name, can we do?

Let’s figure this out.

**Matthew 21:33-46 (NRSV) 85 c.e. +/-**

**and Thomas 65 (The Five Gospels) 50-60 c.e.**

33 "Listen to another parable. There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a wine press in it, and built a watchtower. Then he leased it to tenants and went to another country. 34 When the harvest time had come, he sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his produce. 35 But the tenants seized his slaves and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. 36 Again he sent other slaves, more than the first; and they treated them in the same way.

37 Finally he sent his son to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.' 38 But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, 'This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance.' 39 So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him.

40 Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?" 41 They said to him, "He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the harvest time." 42 Jesus said to them, "Have you never read in the scriptures: 'The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord's doing, and it is amazing in our eyes'? 43 Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom. 44 The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls."

45 When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they realized that he was speaking about them. 46 They wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowds, because they regarded him as a prophet.

**Thomas 65 (The Five Gospels) 50-60 c.e.**

**1 A [...] person owned a vineyard and rented it to some farmers, so they could work it and he could collect its crop from them. 2 He sent his slave so the farmers would give him the vineyard's crop. 3 They grabbed him, beat him, and almost killed him, and the slave returned and told his master. 4 His master said, "Perhaps he didn't know them." 5 He sent another slave, and the farmers beat that one as well. 6 Then the master sent his son and said, "Perhaps they'll show my son some respect." 7 Because the farmers knew that he was the heir to the vineyard, they grabbed him and killed him. [8 Anyone here with two ears had better listen!]**

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Solipsism: a theory holding that the self can know nothing but its own modifications and that the self is the only existent thing; also :extreme egocentrism

Fans of René Descartes credit the French philosopher with introducing solipsism as a major problem of modern philosophy, but the word solipsism most likely sprang from a French satire written by Giulio Clemente Scotti in 1652 called *La Monarchie des Solipses*. The term wasn't used in English until the late 19th century, when solipsism, a composite of the Latin *solus* ("alone") and *ipse* ("self"), was applied purely in the philosophical sense. Recently the word has taken on another, more general sense, suggesting an ego-driven selfishness or self-indulgence.

<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/solipsism>