One week ago the people of the United States began a much too familiar routine. Late Sunday or early Monday we heard the news: a man with a gun had killed dozens of Americans. Over the next several days we heard dramatic stories of those who escaped and of those who acted with courage in the face of danger. We saw fragments of the beauty, the good work and the love in the lives of the people who were killed. We listened to news reports where leaders and experts used all of their leadership skills and expertise to come to the grand conclusion that the shooter was mentally disturbed, angry or evil.

Flags were lowered to half staff. Many hours of television and radio coverage were devoted to the tragic event. Members of congress observed what was described as a moment of silence in honor of the victims of the shooting. This last piece of the routine seems especially ironic to me, because it seems that if our representatives actually wanted to honor the victims they would not keep silent. If members of congress wanted to honor the victims they would talk and do something to keep these killings from happening again and again and again.

According to FBI statistics there is a shooting of four or more people by a single person most days in the United States. There were 27 mass shootings in September, 33 in August, 36 in July, 35 in June, 23 in May, 39 in April, 22 in March . . . do I need to continue? You and I don’t remember most of these mass shootings. The friends and family members of the victims remember these mass shootings.

I don’t recycle sermons; I never take an old sermon and dress it up to preach again, but this is one sermon I can confidently say I could use again in 2018 or 2019 because every year we have at least one of these terrible events where a large number of people is killed by an angry man with a gun. In 2017 it was Las Vegas, in 2016 it was Orlando, in 2015 it was San Bernadino, California and Roseburg, Oregon, and Charleston, South Carolina, in 2014 it was Fort Hood, Texas, in 2013 it was the Washington Navy Yard, in 2012 it was 20 kindergarteners and six adults at the Sandy Hook Elementary School. Do I need to continue? I apologize, for I fear this sermon is getting to be a little repetitive. And that is the point.

We are numb. Death by gunfire is extremely common in the United States. Over 30,000 people will die from guns in the United States this year. That is not just a number. That is 30,000 real people, adults, children and babies, men and women, black and brown and white. Muslims and Christians and Jews and atheists. 30,000 families whose lives are forever changed. We can confidently predict that over 30,000 people will die from gun injuries in 2018 and 2019 and 2020 and 2021.

Someday the story will change. It may not happen in my lifetime, but someday our nation will make the decision to end this madness. That is because God created us for life. When we make the decision to drastically lower the number of guns and end the nearly universal access to guns, then the United States will be a more Christian nation.

When we make the decision to end the slaughter of our children, our brothers and our sisters then, and only then, will we be fulfilling the commitment made by the founders of this nation in the preamble to the constitution: We the people of the United States, in order to form a more perfect union, establish justice, ensure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, secure the blessings of liberty for ourselves and our posterity. We have not secured the blessings of liberty for ourselves and for our posterity. We have not established justice when 80 people die from gun violence each day. We have not ensured domestic tranquility when 500 people die from gun violence each week. We have not provided for the common defense when 2500 people die from gun violence each month. We have failed.
God did not create us for the purpose of violence or for the pursuit of individual rights. God created us for life. God created us for love. Someday this tragic, repetitive, mind numbing, heart numbing story will end.

God is not going to put up with this kind of insanity forever. That is the point of Jesus’ parable of the landowner and the tenants and the vineyard. This is the perfect parable for citizens of the United States of America in the days after the massacre of 59 innocent people. The violence in the parable is shocking, just as the violence of America should be shocking to us.

The landowner sends his slaves to the vineyard to collect his produce. But the tenants seize his slaves and beat one, kill another, and stone the last one. We might still be surprised when the landowner sends more slaves and they are beaten and killed. Then the landowner sends his son to collect what is due to him. We are not surprised that the tenants kill the son. But the fact that the tenants repeat their violent behavior does not mean that things will remain this way forever.

Eventually the owner of the vineyard will come and there will be a big change. The owner of the vineyard will punish those who have acted so violently. The owner will put someone else in charge of the vineyard, someone who will treat him and his people with respect.

Do not be deceived by the repetition of the evil you see. Do not be deceived by the evil that allows the violence to continue. The owner of the vineyard will not stand for it. The owner of the vineyard will make a big change.

In the gospel of Matthew this is the second of three parables about the urgent need to be productive. In the first parable Jesus asked, “Which of the two did the will of his father, the one who said he would work in the vineyard, or the one who actually got the job done?”

The answer is obvious. God’s concern is that we get the job done. God will not wait forever for those who are not productive. God has given us the task of bringing in the fruits of the harvest.

What are the fruits of the harvest? They are all of the varieties of love. The fruits include the kind of love which is about justice for the poor and the weak. The fruits include the kind of love which is about each person being equally included and respected as a member of God’s family. The fruits include the kind of love which is about all kinds of safety for all people.

God will not wait forever for those who are not bringing in the harvest of love. The parable of the vineyard is true, not just for our nation and our communities, it is also true for us as the church of God’s people. I have been in the church my whole life, which is a long time. I sometimes wonder whether we are getting the job done when it comes to bringing in the fruits of the harvest.

I sometimes wonder whether we are getting the job done but I do not wonder about how it might have happened that we might fail to bring in the fruits of the harvest. I do not wonder how we might have failed when we have spent centuries arguing about full inclusion in the church of all of the sorts of people Jesus went out of his way to include. I do not wonder how we might have failed as I have seen so many people in the church, clergy and lay people alike, who are more concerned with winning than with loving. I do not wonder how we might have failed as I have watched most of our people, including myself, devote most of their energies to these green pieces of paper in our wallets, and to words transmitted through something that looks like this (cellphone) or this (laptop), instead of to this set of books which might be called the instruction manual for those who work in the vineyard of God’s kingdom (that would be the Bible).

I do not wonder how it might have happened that we might fail to bring in the fruits of the harvest. I just pray that we do fail to bring in the fruits of the harvest. Do not be deceived by the repetition of the evil you see. Do not be deceived by the fact that those in charge seem motivated by the love of power, rather than the power of love. The owner of the vineyard will not stand for it.