

Vineyard

Preached by Archdeacon Carole Maddux, Diocese of Atlanta
October 8, 2017 at Church of the Common Ground

Are any of y'all old enough to remember the US Olympic athletes in 1968 that raised their fists on the medal podium in protest of the treatment of black Americans?

Or maybe you've seen the iconic photograph if you're too young to have been watching that day. You may have even been lucky enough to visit DC and see the statue of the young athletes in the National Museum of African American History and Culture.

They are famous now but at the time they were vilified. No one wanted the thrill of a US victory tainted by the reminder of how the United States treated some of her citizens. Those athletes were punished for what they did and many people hated them and let them know it.

One thing you may not know is that one of those men, John Carlos, lives right down the street in Clayton County. According to an article in the Atlanta Journal Constitution, he remembers that he and the other athlete, Tommie Smith, had talked about how to protest what was happening at home. The moment they chose was on the podium.

The people in the stadium started to applaud. The applause stopped when he and Smith bowed their heads and raised their fists.

"There was a deafening silence," John Carlos recalls. "Everybody was stunned. Then they started screaming. They were going to shove it down our throats."

They were kicked out of the Olympics and Mexico within 48 hours.

It wasn't any better when Carlos returned to the states, where he said he and his family went through hell.

There were threats. He was investigated by authorities. His children were targeted once it became known Carlos was their father.

"Let me tell you something, when you make a statement for humanity, you become this sacrificial lamb," said Carlos. "Your life is already secondary to the image you want to leave. They could take my life, but they could never erase that image. Once it's done, it's done and you've got to live with it."

Of course, now we have our own generation's example of an athlete taking a stand. Colin Kaepernick has certainly made waves very similarly to those young men 49 years ago. Even the president has weighed in on it.

No one wants to be reminded during our favorite national sport that most of the men playing it are not treated equally

in the courtroom,

on the highways,

in the boardroom,

or in the classroom.

They don't want to be reminded that their entertainment is brought to them at great cost.

They don't want to be reminded when filled with nationalistic pride while singing and gazing on their flag

that the flag is an empty symbol when not ALL are free from the fear of racism and prejudice and bigotry.

So they get mad.

They want to destroy the person who dared to try and take away their pride and good feelings.

Who dared to speak the truth.

Who dared to demand justice and righteousness

Instead of emotional but empty ritual and rhetoric.

In our Gospel today, the tenants of the vineyard have forgotten what the vineyard is for and whose it is. This is more of an allegory than a parable. The tenants are Jerusalem and God keeps sending them prophets to remind them of their responsibilities and obligations---to remind them what the vineyard is for.

To remind them that they are just the stewards,
not the owner.

To remind them that the vineyard is for all.

Of course, they don't want to be reminded. They like to think of themselves as the privileged ones who are in charge of the vineyard. They believe they deserve the vineyard and to heck with any outsider coming in and telling them anything. And so they beat up the prophets.

And then they kill the son.

All to keep others out of the vineyard.

They are so invested in keeping the vineyard for themselves that they have forgotten what it is for.

That it was never theirs but only lent to them to do God's good work. And when they forget **the purpose**,

they lose their way,
kill those who can help them find it again,
and their only product is wild grapes
that produce a bitter wine.

God continues to send us prophets, throughout the ages.

And we continue to attack them.

Whether they are pointing out the evils of racism,
or colonialism,

or sexism,

we continue to not want to hear it.

Whether their names are Martin

or Gandhi

or Malala,

we will try to silence them.

We don't want them raining on our party.

The party we're throwing for ourselves because we think we are so right and so great and so deserving of all that we have.

We have forgotten that all we have is only lent to us and that, more often than not, God's mercy is all that is standing between us and what we truly deserve.

We have forgotten that all that we have can be taken from us and given to a people that will produce the fruits of the kingdom.

Or...

Or...

We can stop clinging to what we think we deserve.

Stop clinging to our vineyards,

and our money,

and our fears,

and our hatreds,

and our need to be right,

and our prejudices,

and anything that gets between us and loving each other and God.

We can regard all those things as "rubbish" to use Paul's word

and be glad to leave it behind

for the infinitely greater love of Christ.

So let us press on toward *that* prize,

heeding the prophets,

shedding the rubbish,

clinging instead to what matters,

justice,

mercy,

and God's love for us and our neighbor,

and then we will be the people producing the fruits of the kingdom.