

Nineteenth Weekend After Pentecost (RCL/A): What Kind of Grapes Are You?

Isaiah 5:1-7; Matthew 21:33-46

October 7-8, 2023

Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

When Pastor Mark, Kristiane and I took a thrilling helicopter ride over beautiful Kauai, we passed over green taro fields nestled next to mountains on the north side of the island, and then flew over other fields that didn't look very interesting, except that there were guards around the perimeter. The chopper pilot told us we were flying over Monsanto's genetically modified crops, growing under tight security because the theft of even one seed could allow competitors to analyze and reproduce genetic modifications Monsanto had invested a lot of time and money researching. Corporate spying is real and doesn't always involve just the digital theft of intellectual property.

In each of today's lessons from Isaiah and Matthew, there is a vineyard, **and** there is a watchtower erected **in** the vineyard. The watchtower was like a sentry post at a prison, except in reverse: guards were on duty in the vineyard to prevent outsiders from getting in, not insiders from getting out! The watchtower was security against the theft of beautiful clusters of ripe grapes.

In Hebrew and Christian Scripture, though, especially in **parables** like these (earthly stories with heavenly meanings), a vineyard isn't just a vineyard. A vineyard symbolizes the people of Israel, the Chosen People of God. These are parables of **judgment**, though, so the stories clearly name human failures in love toward God **and** toward neighbor.

The stories emphasize God's faith**ful**ness and Israel's faith**less**ness.

In Isaiah, God speaks of transplanting a vine from Egypt, referring to the Exodus, God's liberation of the children of Israel from slavery. God lovingly plants this vine in Israel, does **everything** necessary for the vineyard to thrive and produce **award**-winning grapes, an **amazing** harvest; but instead all it bears are bitter wild grapes. God is not amused. God says:

*And now I will tell you  
what I will do to my vineyard.  
I will remove its hedge,  
and it shall be devoured;  
I will break down its wall,*

*and it shall be trampled down.  
I will make it a waste;  
it shall not be pruned or hoed,  
and it shall be overgrown with briars and thorns;  
I will also command the clouds  
that they rain no rain upon it. (Isaiah 5:5-6)*

When **Jesus** tells His parable of the vineyard, the problem isn't the fruit, it's the vineyard workers. The harvest comes in just fine, but the workers want the crop **and** the vineyard for themselves. They don't just steal the grapes. They **kill** the vineyard owner's **slaves** who have come to collect the crop, and then they kill the vineyard owner's **son** who comes next. When Jesus asks His audience, "*Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?*" (Matt. 21:40), they answer:

*"He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at harvest time." (Matt. 21:41)*

Clearly, these are not warm-fuzzy Scripture passages. Even though we're not the original audience of either one, as always there's a message here for **us**, too. The wild grapes produced by the vineyard in Isaiah's parable represent acts of **un**-righteousness toward God, **un**-compassion toward neighbor. God is very clear throughout Hebrew Scripture, and especially through the prophets, that we are to do justice and love mercy (cf. Micah 6:8). But part of the reason God had Isaiah prophesy to the people that they were going to be carried off into captivity in Babylon, is that the rich were not sharing with the poor, judges were accepting bribes, justice was being perverted, widows and orphans were not being cared for, refugees from other lands were not being welcomed. The people were doing what they darned well pleased. **Why** is God going to break down the wall and allow the vineyard to fall into ruins?

*... [God] expected to see justice,  
but saw bloodshed;  
righteousness,  
but heard a cry! (Isaiah 5:7)*

God heard the cry of those who were waiting for God to answer their prayers through the compassion, generosity, humanity of other human beings – those who were blessed to **be** a blessing but who didn't come through because they were looking after their own interests, leaving the poor destitute, homeless, starving, sick and devoid of hope.

In the Gospel, the vineyard owner's slaves represent the prophets who reminded God's people of God's holy expectations and who warned them of dire consequences if they didn't meet those expectations. The people of Israel didn't want to hear that message so they persecuted and killed the messengers. The son of the vineyard owner obviously represents Jesus. (Did you notice the tenants take the son **outside** the vineyard to kill him? Jesus is taken **outside** the city limits of Jerusalem to be crucified.) Those who rejected Jesus didn't recognize that He was the **fulfillment** of God's promise to send a Messiah. Those who rejected Jesus didn't recognize that they were resolved to **shatter** the **Cornerstone** God provided, from which God would build a new creation. Jesus says to the people, "You missed the boat,"

*"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." (Matt. 21:43)*

Let's remember that Jesus was not referring to all Jews. **He** was a Jew. During His lifetime, His closest followers were **all** Jews. Remember, there's a message for us, now. We might be tempted to say too quickly, "Phew, Jesus isn't talking about **us**." But that depends on what fruits our lives are producing. Wild grapes? An attitude of:

- "It's all about me!"
- "Mine! All mine!"
- "Am I my brother's or sister's keeper? Let others fend for themselves!"

Two of the fruits of the kingdom are justice and righteousness. The God who loves the world so much that this God has sent Jesus to save us from our sins, is the same God who calls Israel "*my beloved*" (Isaiah 5:1), and is also the God who does not accept wild grapes at harvest time, whether they be perversions of justice, the turning of a blind eye to the poor, feathering our own nests at others' expense, the exaltation of money over compassion, the elevation of financial security over faithfulness. Here's a Bible scholar's definition of Biblical justice, especially in Isaiah:

... fair and equitable relationships in society grounded in the just will of the Lord and established through honest [human] procedures. When such justice fails, it is because the economically and/or politically powerful have taken advantage of the weak.<sup>1</sup>

Our lessons from both Isaiah and Matthew today remind us there are consequences when we take advantage of the weak. Ours is a God of mercy but also of justice.

The son killed outside the vineyard walls in the parable points us to the Son killed outside the walls of Jerusalem on Calvary. He died that we might live. He gives us the gift of His Body and Blood in this sacrament of Holy Communion. He forgives our failures in love when we recognize them and ask forgiveness. But if we continue to sin in the same ways, how repentant **are** we, really? If we only obey God's commandments when it's convenient, **are** we living faithfully? Words matter. Actions matter. When I honestly look at the "fruit" my life is bearing, is it sour grapes or an exquisite, award-winning cluster?

The folks who rejected Jesus didn't recognize or appreciate the new thing God was doing. They didn't care to participate, so they condemned themselves by their choice. They turned a blind eye to the miracle unfolding before them. By God's grace, may we always Be On the Look-Out (BOLLO!) for the new thing God is doing among us and in our world. May we be joyfully open to identifying the old attitudes that blind us to new realizations, and may we be ready to replace false expectations that misguide us with fresh expectations that open us to holy revelations. May we pray, "Change my heart, O God," and mean it.

Amen

<sup>1</sup>*New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. 6, (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995) p. 89.

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