

A Tough Love Decision

Isaiah 5: 1-7

Luke 12: 49-56

Choice in America is incredible. The consumer marketplace has provided an overwhelming number of choices. Sometimes I have to buy something that I don't commonly buy and an adventure ensues.

Olive oil. How many ways can you configure olive oil that are meaningful? I suppose there are olive oil connoisseurs out there, but aren't people mostly just buying plain old olive oil?

If you want deodorant (and you do), you will have to choose between hundreds of different brands, scents, modes of application, and packaging.

However, if you want hand lotion, apparently you want it with a pump style dispenser which leaves the last 10-15% of the product in the container unreachable. To get at it, you have to remove the pump and pound it out in your hand. If you don't want the pump, expect to pay more. The decision is yours.

Obviously, I've disclosed my bias against pump style dispensers. It is good to know one's biases when it comes to decision-making. Those biases can make you look like a fool if you don't keep them in check.

Investors are warned about their biases. They even have terms for the common ones. One favorite is the "sunk cost bias." You have your eye on an up-and-coming company with stock at \$5 per share. Your investor research tells you that in a year or two, this stock will be worth \$20 per share. You invest \$10,000. There is your sunk cost.

Six months later, there are a series of bad news reports about the company. The \$5 stock has dropped to \$4 per share. You're invested; you stick with it.

Six months later, there is more bad news and the stock drops to \$2.50 per share. If you sell the stock now, you will have lost half of your investment. But sunk cost bias clouds the thinking. Rather than sell the stock because the company seems to be foundering, you buy \$5000 more shares, figuring that it has become an even better deal than before. When it gets to \$20 per share, the original belief, then you will make a killing.

Sunk cost bias prevents you from realizing that the company is in serious trouble and will take you down with it. You could sell and recover half of the investment. But, no, you pumped *more* money into it.

Six months later, the company files for bankruptcy and the stock plummets to 50 cents per share. Yet sunk cost bias persists and you consider investing another \$1000 at 50 cents per share because you still believe that it's a great opportunity. Only when

someone smacks you upside the head and screams, "You moron! They're bankrupt!" only then do you realize that you will *never* make any money and can only lose more.

From afar, that investment decision seems easy to manage, and you have to be a dingbat to be so foolish. When it's up close, your deep investment, then it's a different context altogether. But transfer it within the context of a relationship, and it really gets messy. We recently had a reading from Hosea who is known for continuing his marriage with his hopelessly unfaithful wife Gomer, or last week with old Eli the priest who couldn't bring himself to discipline his wastrel sons and left them in positions of authority in the Temple. Relationships can be difficult. Love makes decisions tough.

The passage from Isaiah 5 begins as a love song, with the prophet apparently playing something like the role of the best man at the symbolic wedding of God and Israel. The love song describes how God had lovingly taken great pains to clear a preferred hillside site, digging it, clearing the stones, and planting it with choice vine stock. A watchtower was built and a winepress set right there, expectantly awaiting the wonderful harvest that would result from a vineyard so fully and lovingly supplied. However, the delightfully perfect vineyard would only produce bad fruit.

Clearly, God's carefully, thoughtfully designed vineyard – generously prepared and supplied in order to produce a fine harvest – is a metaphor for his people Israel. God gave them *everything* they needed to return a worthy, if not a **wondrous** harvest. The promised land given by God was coveted by kingdom after kingdom. God's people had received the Torah-Law to give their lives and activities sacred purpose and righteous direction. The land itself was abundant, but the whole enterprise could only yield bad fruit for the One who provided it all, the God of their covenant promise.

Rhetorical questions ensue as the text shifts to take the form of a trial – no more love song here. (Divorce court?) What more could have been done? Why did it only produce bad grapes? And now what should be done?

The judgment is for the **destruction** of the vineyard, clearing it away altogether.

Actually, that tough-love decision makes that little sense. The judgment on the vineyard, on Israel, is **not** done so that another vineyard could be planted, or the land reused in another way. It is not a foreclosure. Instead, it is **punitive** as efforts are made to ensure that it is made a wasteland, overgrown with briars and thorns with a command to deny it any rainfall. If what God cherishes is not produced, then the land shall produce nothing ... for anyone.

Now the people of God are **not** a vineyard producing grapes. What did God seek as a harvest from his loving providence to his people? They needed to make the right decision, the faithful decision, and seek the sacred way toward God's Kingdom. That Kingdom vision explains what God expected as the produce from the "garden of his delight." It's voiced in vs. 7. *And he looked for justice, but saw bloodshed; for righteousness, but heard cries of distress.*

In the succeeding verses, you can hear how justice was missing and righteousness was abandoned. Having talked in past weeks about these twin features of the Kingdom – justice and righteousness – there’s no need to reiterate the greed, deceit, and arrogance of the strong and wealthy over the weak and vulnerable.

Clearly, God is more than disappointed. The reaction is bitter, personal, and punishing. God expects a worthy harvest from his vineyard, expecting the chosen, covenant people to reflect justice and righteousness worthy of the Kingdom. Their failure to embrace what God desires, divides them from the promise and makes them useless, simply kindling for the fire. As we turn to Jesus’ difficult words in Luke, we hear that the expectation of a worthy harvest remains, no matter the circumstances.

Jesus starts the selection of today’s reading from Luke saying: *I have come to bring fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled.* What is delaying the fire is the process, the expected outcome of his ministry of justice and righteousness that Jesus probably realizes will follow the same course as his mentor, John the Baptist, ending in his execution. That is the “baptism” that he says he must undergo, the end of this life which acts as the “baptism” into new life for all God’s people, for all creation.

Then come the striking words, *Do you think I came to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but division.* There is a bit of word play in the word “division” since it will go on to describe how family members will find themselves divided by the expectations of the gospel. But that’s the verb; the noun in verse 51 is “division” as in “dissension” and “disunity,” a much sharper word than “division.” *Division* suggests basic disagreement. *Disunity* indicates splitting apart, while *dissension* portrays one side opposing the other, even to the point of one side seeming to betray the trust of the other. Does Jesus aim to sow dissension, to cause the status quo to be challenged and undermined by those who choose life in the Kingdom? That’s exactly what he means.

His listeners are as shocked to hear these words as we are. It is a reminder that we should never imagine that Jesus is some doe-eyed idealist, clueless about real life, real people, and the implications of radical change.

Jesus knows all too well that following his way of faith and devotion has consequences. Seeking justice and righteousness for everyone in God’s family is going to provoke a severe backlash by challenging tradition, propriety, and even popular morality. The worldly powers will not yield without violent reaction. The one who truly seeks new life in Christ will have to decide their own direction, accept the consequences, and have the courage of their conviction.

Jesus pushes his audience to recognize that the time of decision is upon them **right now**. The present time is the time for decision; it is as clear as a well-telegraphed change in weather. Even a simpleton could comprehend that a storm is coming by seeing the dark clouds on the horizon, or that on a day in August, it will be hot in the sun. This isn’t genius work. How is it that the word of God can be stuck directly in your ears and you can’t figure it out?

Jesus' admonition is to get your act together, repent of sinful failure and faithlessness, and decide on a complete commitment to the Kingdom way of justice and righteousness. It isn't that this decision is remote or hard to understand. It is a decision that will bring about dissensions, confrontation, and conflict. There will be harsh accusations, a sense of betrayal by departing from accepted standards, and condemnation from those who you thought were family – real family but also the community which can render you an outcast for your demands for true justice and higher righteousness.

Like the lovingly provided vineyard of God, Jesus has been provided to us as the way of truth, goodness and life. Like the vineyard that only produced sour grapes, Jesus and his good news show that the way of the world is not how things are supposed to be, or how things are fated to be. Jesus provides a vision of the Kingdom, of what God intended for God's people and God's creation. Jesus' vision gets opposed, becoming the source of conflict even among family members and fracturing community. The reason is because Jesus demands a decision, to walk in the ways of the world or to walk in the ways of the Lord. You cannot do both; you must choose; you must make a decision.

You may love life the way it is, or even the way you fancy that it used to be, a chimera that can somehow be recaptured in a new time. *A tough love* decision, is expected from those who are presented with Jesus' good news of new life. Woe to those who pass up the opportunity to walk with the Lord in his ministry of justice and righteousness, bringing healing and new life in his name so they can continue unchanged and undisturbed. For those who won't make that decision, maybe for us, God's promise of life never gets truly embraced and the vineyard's harvest is always sour, despite having all of the advantages that our God could provide.

May we always strive for that worthy harvest, that sweet harvest, having made the tough decision, and having staked our path in faithfulness to the Lord's difficult and exceptional way to the Kingdom.