

Curing the Vineyard Blues

Isaiah 5: 1-7

Matthew 21: 33-46

We're back in the vineyard one more time this week. As we've learned, the vineyard isn't simply a place of agriculture where grapes are grown for eating and fermenting when it's talked about in scripture. The vineyard is typically a rich symbol for the Kingdom of God, for the place where God's people live through the grace and providence of their God, where God's people should thrive, should be productive, and should advance the justice and righteousness of God.

Fairfield Presbyterian Church is the vineyard of the Lord, for example, the place where God's people come together to work together to advance the justice and righteousness of the Kingdom. There are many vineyards actually where the word of the Lord has been planted and grown and brought to harvest, repeatedly. For this church, the process has been going on for over a century.

Not all places where the word is planted thrive and yield an abundant harvest, and some simply continue stubbornly with little yield to show for their labors, and some have stopped laboring for the word of the Lord and the abundant fruits of the kingdom.

The distractions that face us in our personal lives, that keep us from living as faithfully and compassionately and generously as we would prefer, or as we would imagine ourselves, also affect churches and corrupt the focus of the labors together. It could be a focus on money, but the Lord didn't say to worry about paying the bills; his faith message said just the opposite. It could be a focus on members, but the Lord didn't worry about having more than 12 disciples; they were quite enough to handle. It could be a focus on popularity, but the Lord wasn't always popular; the crucifixion makes that pretty clear. It could be a focus on personalities, like what seemed to beset the Corinthians of Paul's era and which still happens today in a variety of forms. It could be a focus on private agendas which is quite close to the problem with personalities. It could be a focus on keeping everything the way it's always been, something Jesus never said; indeed, he made change, as in repentance, a hallmark of being faithful. It could be a narrow focus on a certain kind of righteousness, the kind of Pharisaic righteousness that Jesus found loathsome and wrong-headed.

In fact, there are countless ways that the vineyard can become corrupted, getting distracted from its best purpose in faith and action, and instead become a narrow swamp with a green scummy pond at its center, producing nothing for the Kingdom, and seeming defiant of God's will, while giving off a stench and harboring pestilence that ultimately gives God's Kingdom a bad reputation.

In the Isaiah passage, it starts out as a love song. The owner of a vineyard has a vineyard that is for his beloved, a place where wonderful grapes would be grown. The owner took great care and invested considerable time and resources in making this a special place for his beloved, his people. It has a prime location on a very fertile hillside, the stones have been cleared away, choice vines were planted, a vat was constructed as

well as a watchtower. It would seem to have everything it could possibly need to be abundant, productive, and a blessing. It was a very reasonable and even expected outcome that this vineyard would produce delicious grapes in abundance. It is a bitter disappointment that this vineyard produced wild grapes, sour grapes in effect.

For Floridians, this would be like creating an orange grove, installing irrigation, fertilizing, pruning, and using prime stock to populate the grove, and the end result is sour oranges, like the wild stuff that grows out of damaged stock, like after a freeze. It is really nasty.

Around Lake Weir you used to be able find these groves that hadn't been cleared after the last big freezes in the late 80s. They were telltale unkempt and overgrown, yet with trees with orange fruit hanging on the branches. The tree tops were killed by the freeze but the roots would cause it to grow back and produce fruit. But the root stock of orange trees is grapefruit; when the tops above the graft that made it an orange tree get burned up, the grapefruit root stock grows back and produces something that looks like an orange but tastes somewhere between an orange and a grapefruit, in other words, just plain nasty.

Then owner of the vineyard got an unpleasant surprise to have this carefully chosen and provisioned vineyard produce sour grapes. And the tone of this piece shifts from its declared line of being a love song to a challenge, like a court challenge, *And now, inhabitants of Jerusalem and people of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard. What more was there to do for my vineyard that I have not done in it? When I expected it to yield good grapes, why did it yield bad grapes?* There is no answer for the heart-broken owner of the vineyard from the accused; there is silence.

Now comes the judgment. In short, everything will be torn up, torn down, and it will become a wasteland. God will even command the clouds not to rain on it lest something, anything, accidentally grow there. God is intensely upset.

Verse 7 explains it all. We learn that the vineyard is the house of Israel and the people of Judah are the garden of God's delight. What this vineyard was supposed to produce was justice and righteousness. Instead the harvest brought bloodshed and cries of distress.

God had basic expectations for his people, that they strive for justice and righteousness in their life together. There should be a society that seeks to be just, that cares for its weak and vulnerable, that protects children, that corrects evil, that resents and resists corruption, that fairly compensates workers and keeps their property secure. God has seen the fruits of this vineyard so lovingly created and provisioned. God has not seen the expected efforts to achieve such a society focused on justice and righteousness. Instead, justice is a sham, the weak and vulnerable cry out in distress, children are killed and the killers walk away, corruption thrives amid hollow justifications, workers can't make it on their wages and foreclosures abound. That's the harvest of this vineyard, rotten corruption, poisonous indifference, scandalous exploitation, and violent hostility that makes mothers and fathers cry out in their grief. Their child did not come home.

Isaiah spoke to the impending doom, what had already befallen the ravaged northern kingdom of Israel, and the approaching devastation that would come upon the southern kingdom Judah. God abandoned the vineyard and broke off his relationship with his people who would suffer the loss of this relationship because they were indifferent to what was minimally expected, striving for justice and righteousness.

Matthew adapts the parable of the tenants from Mark, but the original source clearly was reflecting the passage we just noted from Isaiah. The owner furnishes his vineyard with everything needed to produce wonderful grapes. At harvest time, the owner sends servants to claim his share of the fruit, but the servants were either beaten or killed.

In Matthew, a larger group of servants goes and the same thing happens to them. Most of the gospels start messing with what was likely in its original form a three step progression to a climax. In the every gospel editors' adaptation, the three step progression gets a makeover that loses its climactic ending. For the owner in Matthew to send a larger group of servants isn't too logical, and it's no surprise that the outcome is the same. For Matthew, the servants sent by the owner represent the prophets sent by God to teach the way of the Kingdom. Presumably, Matthew sees more prophets being sent by God closer to Jesus' time, who are treated the same or worse than earlier prophets.

Then the owner sends his son, thinking they will respect his son according to Matthew. This, too, is completely illogical, but reaches the conclusion that each gospel editor sought; the owner sends his son (Jesus) to his vineyard and the son is killed.

The consequences for this injustice and bloodshed in Matthew have the owner give the tenants a miserable death, and make a new lease arrangement with new tenants. In an anti-Semitic froth, Matthew a bit more intensely than the other gospel editors seems to focus on this death sentence for the Jews who supposedly killed Jesus (in fact, the Romans crucified Jesus). Matthew also closes by directly indicating contempt for the chief priests and Pharisees.

We end up far removed from the original inspiration of the Isaiah passage, but the end here also results in condemnation for the failure to produce from the vineyard the fruits of the Kingdom, the justice and righteousness about which Jesus preached, and which those now faithful must seek to produce as they come into the vineyard as tenants.

The fruits of the Kingdom are the same for today's tenants in the vineyard, striving after justice and righteousness for God's people. On this Worldwide Communion Sunday as Christians across the globe share in the celebration of the Lord's Supper, we're reminded that those Kingdom values pertain to the tenants of the vineyard no matter where the vineyard has been planted by the Lord. Justice and righteousness form the sweet harvest expected from all of us by our loving and gracious God.

May we remember that we are tenants, only tenants, who serve the Lord our God. The vineyard is loaned to us, only loaned to us. We are never the owners, and can never forget who the owner is and what the owner expects from us.

Remember, too, that the owner can cure the vineyard blues, but the remedy isn't pleasant. Let the justice and righteousness of the Lord our God be our constant focus as we serve the Lord faithfully.