

Sour Grapes Harvest

Isaiah 5: 1-7

Matthew 21: 33-46

A friend posted a video on Facebook. He was pretty excited that the pastor of a local conservative, mostly or all-white congregation had decided to have a panel discussion on race in place of, or as, the sermon. My friend who posted it said that he hadn't seen it yet, but thought it was wonderful that a local conservative, white, evangelical church would have a discussion about race.

As President of [Bridges Project](#), I shared his enthusiasm as I went to watch the 40 minute video. There was the pastor, a white guy with an annoying habit of stopping what he was saying in mid-sentence to let the congregation fill in the word, usually an obvious one. He would say something like, "And on the third day, Jesus was ... [pause for congregation to answer] ... resurrected." He must have done that over a dozen times.

Anyway, the panel consisted of two black pastors, one younger and one older who had grown up in Ocala, and one Hispanic from Marion Oaks. They were all from the conservative side of the spectrum theologically. There were lots of Bible quotes, and lots of how we need Jesus. There were lots of remarks about how God doesn't recognize race, that all of creation was called "good," and what we need to do is to love each other. That went on for the entire 40 minutes.

I came to the end, feeling rather upset, and a bit creepy. Did I miss something because I was multi-tasking, listening and doing other things at the same time? I decided to listen to the whole 40 minutes one more time. It was a bit of a struggle with the pastor doing his thing. But there it wasn't.

Now I understand that this is a tricky format. When the sermon gets replaced by a panel, or by question-and-answer, or by group discussion, the pastor has to be willing to surrender control. The pastor cannot expect to move through this multi-faceted format and then come to some predetermined conclusion. The pastor has to be willing to let the conversation go where it will and take what the process provides to raise up the message that's been given. I don't think the pastor had accepted those limitations. He knew where he wanted to end up, and his questions and comments got them there.

The panel participants are not on their own home turf. They're present at this pastor's invitation. Their role is to participate within the bounds that the pastor is providing. To rock this boat would be inappropriate. It isn't those pastors' boat to rock; it would be like a mutiny. Mutinies get ugly fast. I don't know how they felt about taking time away from their own churches to be there, but I'd imagine that they felt it was not worth their effort. This is why black people are reluctant to talk to white people about race issues; white people don't *really* want to know; they simply want their own views validated, primarily gaining assurance that they themselves harbor no racism.

So, there it wasn't. After 40 minutes of supposedly talking about race and the Christian response, they had not in fact talked about race in society at all. They had done

an incredible dance all the way **around** the issue of race, and never once spoke about it. It isn't like there is a lack of race issues in our society. Pick one! Just one! But no, not one. For 40 minutes.

What was really quite comic/tragic toward the end was the pastor saying how difficult it is to talk about race. He's right; it is. And he showed it by going 40 minutes without ever addressing the actual topic.

The comments on the church's Facebook page where the video was posted were gushing about how wonderful it was that this had taken place, how it was such a blessing, how it was an act of God, et cetera et cetera ad nauseum.

The message of the day was that good Christians love one another, and there is no room for racism among genuine Christians. Bottom line: if you're a good Christian, you can't be racist. I'm sure there wasn't a single soul in that congregation who didn't believe that they were a good enough Christians not to be racist. End of problem. The church and its faithful simply need to be loving. Racism is not an issue that they need to worry about. And so the white drumbeat of indifference, rejection, and negation of any issue regarding race in America keeps its tempo.

Yet here was the well-prepared forum, a panel of racially and ethnically diverse pastors, an audience ready made to listen, a topic of urgency pertinent to faithful Christian witness and understanding, and 40 minutes to delve into what this is really all about, an occasion to open the eyes of the blind, to bring healing sight and understanding to white eyes and ears that consistently refuse to consider the unique struggles and issues of black people in America.

This is the wonderful vineyard that God speaks about in Isaiah. It has everything needed to produce a wonderful harvest of sweet delicious grapes. All of the right elements have been thoughtfully put in place. There is no reason for anything but a fine harvest from this vineyard.

But when the harvest time comes, there are only sour grapes. For all that time, effort, energy, and resources, there are sour grapes. For all of the thoughtfulness, care, and trouble, wasn't there a reasonable expectation that the harvest would be an abundant blessing? But no, there are sour grapes. The end of verse 7 says: *God looked for justice, but saw bloodshed; for righteousness, but heard cries of distress.*

The passage from Isaiah affirms once again the gracious and generous provision of God for all the needs. God always provides what we need, although it may not necessarily be what we want. But surely, the operator of that vineyard couldn't say that not enough had been provided. God even made sure there was the right amount of rain for this vineyard, but all it would produce was sour grapes, good for nothing. It wasted God's generous gifts, and earned God's contempt for it. In this case, God wasn't going to keep investing in a losing proposition. It was time to take it all down and be done with it.

There is this loss of hearing, loss of awareness or comprehension that accompanies sour grapes. Sometimes God sends a warning. We've noted Jonah recently and his mission to Nineveh which, to any sane person, was a complete surprise that these people actually did repent, and then God repented. God will typically warn God's people of disaster ahead, but God's people typically have a hard time hearing it, taking seriously, comprehending it, and doing something about it. Ignoring God's clear warnings is not terribly smart, but it is typical.

The parable of the tenants in the vineyard follows right on the heels of last week's parable of the two sons. That was the one where the father tells one son to go work in the vineyard, and the son says *yes*, but doesn't go. The father goes to the other son and tells him to go work in the vineyard, and the son says *no*, but goes and works anyway. Which son did the will of the father? is the question which gets answered by the chief priests and elders.

In the parable of the tenants in the vineyard then, the audience continues to be the religious leaders who sought out Jesus in the Temple to challenge his authority. At this point, they may have questioned the wisdom of the move, but it's too late now. Jesus is on a roll as he launches into the parable to the tenants in the vineyard. With that context, clearly the vineyard is what God has created to fulfill God's purposes, to produce blessings of wonderful grapes. God is not operating the vineyard; the vineyard has been entrusted to the tenants, who symbolically represent the religious leaders, the chief priests and elders.

In Isaiah, the vineyard's harvest was sour grapes and that sucked. Here in Jesus' parable, the servants of the vineyard owner go at harvest time to collect the fruit, but those servants get beaten, stoned, and killed by the tenants. Remember how Jesus slipped John the Baptist into the exchange with the religious leaders when we talked last week. Keeping the same thread running, Jesus makes an allusion again here to the death of John the Baptist as one of the servants getting killed by the tenants.

Matthew's version of the parable has the owner sending still more servants who also get beaten, stoned, and killed. (Mark 12 has something closer to what the original may have been.) Then finally, the owner sends his son, believing the tenants would not harm him.

However, the tenants are idiots. We know this because, upon seeing the son approaching, they say to each other: *This is the heir. Come, let's kill him and take his inheritance.* The tenants are morons because there is no way they would ever be able to take away this inheritance. The tenants may be morons, but that's a direct slap in the face of the religious leaders to whom Jesus is speaking because the tenants represent these religious leaders. The tenants will never be able to rightfully take the inheritance; it's doomed to failure, but they do it anyway. They kill the owner's son.

The tenants have adopted this corrupt view that, because they're the ones running the vineyard, they somehow get to call the shots in the manner that suits them.

They don't seem to care who the owner is or what the owner expects; they're going to do what they want.

The end result of this harvest for the owner is once again sour grapes, not literally like in Isaiah, but figuratively the same result. God invests blessings of abundance, everything needed to produce a wonderful harvest, yet again nothing worthwhile comes out of the enterprise. God sends the word out to God's people to get it together, but they ignore the warnings, dismiss the instructions, and keep going merrily on their way to failure.

We do the same thing when things go wrong and we ignore what should be obvious. As a society, we won't talk about climate change just because we got hammered by several storms; it isn't the appropriate time, we're told. We won't talk about gun control just because there is another horrific mass shooting; it isn't the appropriate time, we're told.

Of course, there are things we do in our individual lives that are a perfect imitation of the same thing. The doctor tells us something, and we go about our business without making any changes. Our lives grow dull and depressing, but we keep plodding along like something will change without any effort on our part.

God has provided what we need to have a wonderful, bountiful harvest, but we don't listen, we don't change, and we end up with a sour grape harvest. God has provided for you and for me so that we can do amazing things, no matter where we are on life's journey. But we need to pay attention to the One who wants to see the promise fulfilled in us. That's when it can be sweet.