

The Vineyard Song – Isaiah

How many of you have at some time or another tried to grow a garden or flower bed or something along those lines? Has anyone had the experience of feeling like you did things the way you were supposed to, but it still didn't really turn out?

This year was like that for me. Especially tomatoes. I don't feel like I did anything different than I ever do. I composted. I watered. I fertilized at least once. I did get tomatoes, but I didn't get as many as usual and they weren't as good as usual.

And on one plant that was supposed to have the big juicy slicers, I got these weird misshapened things that sort of wrapped around themselves. They were impossible to just slice. I got a mysteriously warped version of what I'd expected.

That's the situation with the first part of this today's reading from Isaiah, only with grapes. The vine-grower has bent over backward to nurture this vineyard so that good sweet fruit would grow. But instead, wild grapes grew.

So, what's wrong with wild grapes? From what I've read, they can still be eaten and used for wine.

Apparently they're smaller, and they're not as sweet. And they can become an invasive weed.

In a vineyard, wild grapes are a warped version of what was planted. And the vines can invade and warp the entire vineyard.

So of course this is a metaphor. God is the vine grower here and the vines are the people of Israel and Judah. God planted the vines, tended them, cared for them.

But they fell short of what God intended them to be. Instead of being big, juicy, sweet cultivated grapes, they became smaller, harder, sourer grapes.

God had expected the people of Israel...and later Judah... to create a new kind of society...a society of justice for all, but especially for the poor...a society of peace and care for one another.

Instead God got bloodshed and the cries of the vulnerable. Mostly this probably wasn't literal bloodshed, but the slow ebbing of life from those who were too poor and weak to survive a social and economic system stacked against them.

When you read the prophets, it becomes very clear what the two chief sins of Israel and Judah were.

One is selling out to other nations, hoping they could protect them. In doing so, they sold out to the gods of those nations and turned their back on their own God.

Their second sin had to do with how they treated the poor and the widow and the orphan and the alien. Over and over in the prophets, you see an image of a nation whose wealthiest and most powerful exploited the poor. The rich got richer while the poor worked in nearly slave-like conditions to increase the wealth of the rich.

That injustice was going to lead to the defeat of Judah, just as it had Israel two centuries before. It seems that God's idea of how people should relate to one another is woven into the communities God creates.

And when people fail to care for one another, especially the poor, the whole thing starts to unravel.

That's what happened to Israel and Judah. They failed to love God and love their neighbor, especially their most vulnerable neighbors. And it led to their undoing. Imagine their shock to learn that just being God's chosen people didn't mean they could ignore God's commandments.

So before we talk about this stump in the second part of the reading, let's clarify the history briefly...last week we read from the prophet Hosea. He wrote to Israel, the northern Kingdom.

Isaiah was writing to Judah, the southern kingdom. At this point, Israel has ceased to exist. Assyria defeated them, scattered them and moved other conquered people in. What was once the people of Israel is now a mixed ethnic group with no unique culture or religion.

Judah is the southern kingdom. It is also in peril of being defeated, only their particular enemy is Babylon.

And they're going down. They ended up defeated by Babylon, and Jerusalem and the Temple were destroyed.

Babylon's approach was different from the Assyrians. After conquering a people, they left many of them in place, but carted the leaders and all the most educated and talented off to Babylon to live as exiles.

Babylon was eventually defeated and the new ruler let the people of Judah go back home.

When they returned, Judah was just a tiny remnant of what it had once been...a stump from a once glorious tree.

I grew up in Grand Island. In the summer of 1980 I was home from college. On a tumultuous evening in June, Grand Island was struck by seven tornadoes. One hit our house. We lost part of the roof.

In our backyard, there was a maple tree. We'd moved to this house just 8 years before and my dad planted the tree then, so it wasn't huge. But maples grow fast so it was getting pretty good sized.

The tornado twisted and tore off the limbs of that tree. All that was left was a stump. Among all the other stuff to deal with after the tornado and just with regular life, my dad never got around to getting the stump out.

Eventually a little green shoot came out of that stump. Over time more shoots grew out of the stump. You'd have to say it grew back as more of a bush than a tree, but new life came from what appeared to be dead.

That's the metaphor Isaiah uses for the second part of today's reading.

The shoot coming from the stump of Judah would also bring new life. The shoot was a new ruler. Under his rule of wisdom, justice and righteousness, God's people would be drawn back into the kind of world God desired.

What Isaiah didn't know...and what the people of Judah didn't know...was that that ruler would in fact be God...in the person of Jesus.

The God manifested in creation...the God who dwelled among the people in the pillars of cloud and fire in the desert...the God who dwelled among them in their worship in the Temple...that God would come to them as a flesh and blood ruler.

And that ruler, Christ the king, would establish the kingdom for good and all.

Let's keep going with the stump metaphor to look at what this means for us. Through the birth, death and resurrection of Christ, that first shoot from the stump, we in the church are grafted on to the tree.

And we are called to the same vocation as Israel was. We are called to love God and love our neighbors. We are especially called to love the most vulnerable... the sick and the poor and the migrant and the prisoner and those whom we deem "different." And like Israel, we are liable to judgment when we do not.

When the church fails in its vocation of loving God and neighbor, especially the weakest and poorest of neighbors, we too are likely to become a remnant of what we once were.

When we as individual Christians fail in our vocation to be faithful to God and care for our most vulnerable neighbors, we too fall under judgment.

That can be a huge shock to some Christians. Many Christians have a very different idea of what it means to be God's people and what kind of life that involves.

But if the prophets have anything left to say to us, there are two things we need to be most concerned about. The first is what it means to love and be faithful to God in our time.

The second is what it should look like to love and care for the most vulnerable in our society...the sick, the poor, the mentally ill, the ones whose sexual identity falls outside our norm, the immigrants at our border, those whose racial or ethnic identity has put them at a disadvantage at birth.

And lest you think this is just an Old Testament thing, I assure you it's not. Jesus said the same thing.

But here's the hope. This stump really is an image of death and resurrection.

We all too often become like small, hard sour grapes. We fall short of God's call to be faithful to both God and our vocation of caring for others.

Like Judah, when we hear God's word of judgment...when we hear how disappointed God is over our destructive...and self-destructive behavior, it can be a shock. I mean we believe in Jesus...isn't that enough?

Well, in fact, life in Christ is enough. But what that means is that daily we will experience the death of those things in us that bring despair and death to others.

But then, like the dead-looking stump, new green shoots of compassion, justice and real love can sprout...and grow. And God's kingdom spreads.