

“Finding Hope for Sour Grapes”

Sermon by Lisa Crismore

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Isaiah 5:1-7

Let me sing for my beloved my love-song concerning his vineyard: My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. He dug it and cleared it of stones and planted it with choice vines; he built a watchtower in the midst of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it; he expected it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes.

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 grapes, why did it yield wild grapes?

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.

For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the people of Judah are his pleasant planting; he expected justice, but saw bloodshed; righteousness, but heard a cry!

Music and songs have a gift to transport us back in time to a special place or a memory. I think I shared with you that “What Child Is This?” reminds me of an Advent worship service some 30 years ago at St. Andrew Presbyterian Church. A church member, Ann Nation sang it from the side aisle. It gave me goose bumps and raised the hair on my arms.

Music and songs also have a gift of teaching us. By setting facts and information to music, it has been proven to stay with people longer than simply memorizing them. I am sure we all learned our ABCs from that simply rhythm tune taught to us in kindergarten or preschool. I know our Middler Class learned the books of the Bible from the song Jan Dorsey and Debbie Mansell taught them.

It is no wonder that the prophet Isaiah sends this important message to the house of Israel and people of Judah in the form of a song. Not just a song but specifically a love song. Isaiah begins by singing about a vineyard owner who lovingly cared for his beloved grape harvest. He cleared the ground, dug and planted choice vines. This farmer did everything by the book with great hopes that his vineyard would bear delicious fruit. There were plans that these grapes would bring joy to all who would drink the wine and the community would be blessed by the fruit.

The song becomes a duet and the vineyard owner chimes into the song adding his own verses. We quickly discover that the growing grapes had a mind of their own and they have turned wild. They have not grown the way the vineyard owner had planned. They have come out sour tasting and full of horrible bitter seeds. We hear the aching disappointment in the question, “What more was there to do in my vineyard that I have not done in it?” The answer is simply “nothing!”

I think we can all relate to this. I know that we are not farmers but we have all put our whole heart and soul into something only to come up with disappointment in the outcome. Perhaps, it was a job or promotion that you were seeking. You answered all the questions right in the interview. You had all the job skills required to do the job. You had jumped through all the hoops that the employer asked of you. Yet in the end, they gave it to another person. Perhaps, it was a relationship. You put your whole heart and soul into building a friendship that you thought would last forever. You put time and energy into this other person’s life only to find out that this person betrayed you in the end.

We have all been on the receiving end of being disappointment and deeply hurt. We can then all relate to the vineyard owner’s response as we hear the love song take on bitter notes of retaliation. There will no longer be care or protection given to this precious crop. The lack of

pruning and hoeing will permit the weeds to take over and choke the wild grapes. Rain will be held from giving nourishing water to the plants and the likelihood of survival is in question. The vineyard owner is done. He is willing to walk away and leave this crop to fend for itself.

The song writer is now revealed as the prophet finishes the song with clearly announcing that the vineyard owner is God - the Lord of host and the wild grapes are the people of Israel and Judah. The poetic words of the song reveals the harsh reality that God's people are the ones that have not met their creator's expectations of justice and righteousness. It is God's people, who have caused bloodshed and cries of others. The rich have exploited the poor and the oppressed. They have let their power and greed take advantage of the weak. People are hurting because of other's selfishness. The community is hurting and thus, God is hurting.

This song is sung to the people, urging them to wake-up and look at their relationship with God and each other. It comes at a time right before the exile. God is so desperate to get their attention and see the seriousness of their actions. One may question the use of "love" to describe this song. It does not end on a very happy note.

This song to me speaks of God's tough love. It gives a clear picture of how we are not puppets on a string. God gives us scripture to guide our life and make good choices. God is there to guide us and give voice when we ask through our prayers. God protects us along the way. God gives us amazing strength to endure the hardships that we face in our day-to-day life. God also gives us our freedom to grow and choose the way we want to live. We hear the frustration and God's heartache because God's expectations have not been met.

This song comes to us as a learning tool. We have the power to change. We can turn our wild, sour grapes into wonderful tasting fruit. We just have to look where justice and righteousness is needed. In our world where there is so much hurting and brokenness, violence and corruption, hunger and abuse, it is clear that we all need to hear the song of Isaiah.

My friend, Sarah Sedgwick, nine years ago decided to become a big sister to a child who was in great need. Sarah enjoyed being a positive role model for this little girl. Over time, Sarah witnessed this girl's single mother make poor choices when it came to using drugs and associating with the wrong men. She would put her children in danger. Finally, the woman was arrested and put into jail. Sarah found that the children had been left in the care of her boyfriend, who was neglecting and abusing the children. When Sarah and her husband got news of this, she went to the courts, got temporary custody and the kids were put into their care.

The mother has recently been released and has taken the two younger children back to live with her. Sarah and her husband asked for full custody of the girl they have mentored for years. The mother agreed. This has been a difficult road of sacrifice and patience. Nor did Sarah realize 9 years ago when she agreed to be this young child's little sister, that her life would be changed forever. But, I know Sarah would not have it any other way. Sarah's prayer is that they can break the cycle and this child will grow up with an education and have a fruitful life.

Yesterday, I had the joy of being with our officers of the church in the morning for a retreat and then later in the day at the ordination service of Molly DeWitt. The officers of the church were talking about the assets of John Knox and possible goals for our future. Molly was ordained in the chapel at Pyoca. Hanging from the ceiling of the chapel were hundreds of paper cranes. They symbolized the camp theme for this year, which was "Peace Works." Erin Mansell echoed this as she shared about her experience as a camp counselor at Pyoca with our Prime Timers this past week.

These are all instances of God's people seeking ways of justice and righteousness. Where do we fit into the song of the vineyard owner? Where is God singing in your ear about justice and righteousness? Where can you make a difference when it comes to God's expectations?

This song of Isaiah's may end of the vineyard owner leaving us with little hope. But, the words of God's messenger goes on. Isaiah 11 declares, "A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit. In that day the Root of Jesse will stand as a banner for the peoples; the nations will rally to him, and his resting place will be glorious." This is scripture many times used during Advent for the prophesy of the coming of the Messiah. It also promises that even though God as a loving parent may get frustrated and feel the need for tough love God never gives up on us. God is always wanting us to grow and bear fruit. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Shared at the end of worship before the blessing - Nobel Prize laureate and Holocaust survivor, Elie Wiesel says, "We must always take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Human Rights are being violated on every continent. More people are oppressed than free. How can we not be sensitive to their plight? Human suffering anywhere concerns men and women everywhere. There is so much to be done, there is so much that can be done. One person - one person of integrity can make a difference, a difference of life or death."

(<http://eliewieselfoundation.org/elie-wiesel/nobelprizespeech/>)