

THE PARABLE OF THE VINEYARD Isaiah 5:1-7

*Preached by Carolyn Grohman at North Presbyterian Church, Williamsville
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[before reading the Scripture]:

Jesus told several parables about vineyards, but did you know that there is also a parable of the vineyard in the Old Testament? Listen now to this parable found in Isaiah 5:1-7. [read]

This parable of the vineyard is told by the prophet Isaiah, who begins by singing a love-song on behalf of his beloved, who turns out to be God. In this parable, God is the one who owns the vineyard. As Isaiah tells it, God owned the land on a very fertile hill. God dug the ground, cleared it of stones, planted it with choice vines, built a watchtower in the midst of it, and hewed out a wine vat. In other words, God did all that could possibly have been done to have a good vineyard that would produce good grapes.

But the vineyard instead produced wild grapes, grapes that were bitter and no good. So God decided to let the vineyard be destroyed, to be trampled down, to be overgrown with briars and thorns, and to receive no rain, as punishment for the fact that the vineyard was not producing what God had expected it to produce.

Now we are told in verse 1 that this is a love song that Isaiah is singing on behalf of God. It's a very strange love song, don't you think? And yet I imagine that if any of you are parents of children who have not turned out the way you wanted them to, you can identify with God here in this parable. God is disappointed and hurt and angry that the vineyard is not producing good grapes, even though God did everything imaginable to raise up a good vineyard that would produce good grapes.

Sometimes parents do everything imaginable to raise up good children, children who will be good fruit. And yet, in spite of everything the parents do, the children turn out to be wild grapes. If some of you have children who have disappointed you, you do not stop loving them. Although you are hurt and disappointed and angry that they have turned out to be wild grapes, you continue to love them, even when you allow them to suffer the consequences of their rebellious ways.

This is the sense in which this parable is a love song. God continues to love us, even when we are wild and do not do what God expects us to do. God allows us to be punished for our actions, but God continues to love us, as all parents continue to love their children, even when the children do not turn out the way the parents had wanted. This is a love song sung by a parent whose heart is breaking because the children have been such a disappointment. You can almost hear God weeping in disappointment and frustration, as God sings, "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 wild grapes?" The love song of a parent with a broken heart.

Now obviously the vineyard in this parable represents the children of God. Originally, Isaiah was referring to the Hebrew people of his day, the people of Judah, who were indeed punished for their wildness by being conquered by the Babylonians and taken off to Babylon in captivity.

But this parable also speaks to us in our day---not as individuals, but as members of the whole human family. All of us who live on this earth are the vineyard that God planted and cultivated. God raised us up to produce good grapes---grapes of justice and righteousness, as the parable says in verse 7. But instead of producing these good grapes of justice and righteousness, haven't we as a human family produced wild grapes? Grapes of bloodshed and crying, as Isaiah says?

Just think of the countries and regions that have dominated the headline news in recent years: Iraq, Afghanistan, Israel and Palestine, Darfur. Clearly, when God looks at our world, at the vineyard God planted, God sees bloodshed, not justice. It's interesting that the opposite of bloodshed in this parable is justice, which confirms what many of us know already---that peace is impossible without justice. In our world, God sees bloodshed, not justice; and crying, not righteousness.

For example, God hears the cries of the men, women, and children who are being tortured, raped, and killed in Darfur. In April we participated in a national campaign sponsored by *Sojourner's Magazine* to "Save Darfur---For God's Sake." All of us were invited to call the White House and encourage President Bush to lead the international community in stopping the genocide in Darfur. You've heard the statistics: over the past four years 400,000 people have been killed in Darfur, which is an area about the size of Texas in western Sudan. In addition, hundreds of thousands of women have been raped, two and a half million people have fled their homes and are living in refugee camps, and another million are still in their villages, under the constant threat of rape and murder by the government-supported Janjaweed militia. President Bush has labeled these atrocities as genocide and has promised to work to end them quickly, but still the killing and the raping continue unabated.

We know the statistics, but what can we do? In July, when I attended the Presbyterian Peacemaking Conference in Montreat, North Carolina, I went to a briefing on Darfur, seeking answers to that question "What can we do?" I learned at that briefing that we can do several things. For starters, we can pray for peace in Darfur. Second, we can continue calling and e-mailing the White House, asking President Bush to make peace in Darfur a top priority and to be more pro-active in seeking to end the genocide. There are still handouts available from the campaign in April on the table in the south entrance way that tell you how to call the White House and suggest what you can say. Also, if you go on the web to www.savedarfur.org, you will find a quick and easy way to e-mail President Bush. You will also find there lots of information about the situation in Darfur. That's www.savedarfur.org.

Third, we can write or e-mail or phone our senators and congressional representative, urging them to vote for legislation that takes a tough stance on the genocide in Darfur. Fourth, we can send money for humanitarian relief through Presbyterian Disaster Assistance. And finally, we can teach our children and grandchildren to respect all human life and to treat all persons with respect and dignity, especially those who are different from us.

Many of you probably saw the movie "Hotel Rwanda" several years ago about the genocide in Rwanda in the 1990s, in which 800,000 people were killed. In that movie's true story, one man took it upon himself to save 1200 people from death. But his heroism, as magnificent as it was, is dwarfed by the fact that we in the rest of the world closed our eyes and turned our backs on the genocide in Rwanda as it was unfolding. We are accountable to God for our lack of involvement in Rwanda, and we will also be accountable to God if we fail to act to save Darfur.

God hears the cries of those men, women, and children in Darfur, and God surely cries along with them, wondering: “Why, why, have the people in my vineyard not been righteous and just to each other?” God wants justice, not bloodshed; righteousness, not crying, in God’s vineyard. God wants all of God’s children to be treated with goodness, kindness, love, and respect. God does not want the wildness of hatred, bigotry, rape, or killing anywhere in God’s vineyard.

Now there are some signs of hope in our world, signs that people of faith are taking seriously the Biblical message that God expects good grapes, not wild grapes, in God’s vineyard. The fact that people of faith are demanding that something be done to end the genocide in Darfur is hopeful. We have also finally seen an end to the bloodshed in Northern Ireland. But there is still much to be done in our world to end the bloodshed and hatred.

Some of you may have seen the play “The Laramie Project,” which I saw at Chautauqua a few years ago. This play is the true story about the brutal murder several years ago of Matthew Shepard, the young college student in Laramie, Wyoming, who was tortured and killed simply because he was gay. The play examines the question of how such a brutal murder could have happened in a small, pleasant city like Laramie. The conclusion is that this sort of thing could happen anywhere in this country, because we as a society have taught our children to hate those who are different from us. There is an especially strong indictment in the play against the churches, either for proclaiming the message of hate or else for remaining silent and thus allowing that message of hate to be equated with God’s word.

In one of the most memorable scenes in the play, several people representing fundamentalist churches are picketing the funeral of Matthew Shepard and are carrying signs that proclaim “God hates _____(and then the slur word for homosexual persons).” It must make God weep to see such signs and to see the results of such harsh and hate-filled rhetoric. Now you and I know that God does not hate anyone, but are we proclaiming the opposite message---that in fact God loves everyone? Are we proclaiming that message of love clearly enough and consistently enough to be heard over the din of hatred?

The parable of the vineyard in Isaiah 5 leaves us with this question: What kind of vineyard are we going to be in this world? Are we going to be a vineyard that produces wild grapes, grapes of bloodshed and crying? Or are we going to be a vineyard that produces good grapes, grapes of justice and righteousness? What can you do, and what will you do, to bring our world closer to being a vineyard of justice and righteousness?