

19th Sunday after Pentecost; Proper 22A
Sermon 10.8.23

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!

Matthew 21:33-46

“Listen to another parable. There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a wine press in it, and built a watchtower. Then he leased it to tenants and went to another country. When the harvest time had come, he sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his produce. But the tenants seized his slaves and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. Again he sent other slaves, more than the first; and they treated them in the same way. Finally he sent his son to them, saying, ‘They will respect my son.’ But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, ‘This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance.’ So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him. Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?” They said to him, “He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the harvest time.” Jesus said to them, “Have you never read in the scriptures: ‘The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord’s doing, and it is amazing in our eyes’? Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom. The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls.” When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they realized that he was speaking about them. They wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowds, because they regarded him as a prophet. (520)

At a meeting this week, some church members were gathered to talk building matters. We were trying to identify a problem that seemed to be developing in the rear wall.

Or was it the front wall?

The conversation fell into a moment of confusion. The developing problem was in the front wall of the sanctuary but the rear wall of the meetinghouse, which are the same thing, right? If you stand outside the meetinghouse, you know the front is the one with the big front doors and the back is the one opposite the one with the big front doors. But if you stand inside the sanctuary, then the front is where the cross and pulpit are.

A church building, a church sanctuary: this is one of those built spaces that changes orientation once you're inside. The front has become the back. The back has become the front. (The least has become the greatest, and now the first are last and the last first.) In that conversation about the developing problem in the rear wall, the front wall: it took more than a moment for everyone to come to a shared understanding of exactly the spot we were all talking about.

Church buildings, church sanctuaries: they're meant to disorient you, to reorient you. They're meant to create a different form of reality, a different experience of reality, a different realm even. (Last, first; least, greatest.) Something like the vineyard Isaiah imagined, a place of abundance where no one need keep count. A place of fruitfulness for all, justice everywhere you look.

Isaiah prophesied just prior to when Babylon would attack. First Isaiah did, anyway, which is the portion of this long prophetic book that we heard from just now. First Isaiah. Foreboding was in the air like that stillness before a storm. The wheels of history were turning and there was no stopping what hadn't yet happened but would. Babylon would destroy the land, the city. As much had already happened to Israel, to the north. And soon it would happen in Judea, in Jerusalem. You could feel it. And Isaiah made much of it. The Temple would come down, a painstaking process, mortar burned to melting so the stones could be pulled down off one another. To destroy such a building as the Temple: Babylon had to really *mean* it.

The thing is, this wasn't a total injustice, not according to Isaiah's understanding anyway. It was actually more confusing than that. It was possible even that Babylon was doing as the Lord intended. These two nations—Israel and Judah—were, after all, to be a people with a place that allowed for a playing out of perfect justice. The Law the people had received and the fresh start in a new land: all of this was a perfect new beginning, the opportunity to have a new Eden, a renewed garden or vineyard where nature could be cultivated in such a way as life might abound. Good grapes.

But instead, there grew wild grapes, more bitter, not as sweet. Instead there grew injustice, unfairness, an off-kilter and out-of-balance, the powerful using their power to maintain their power rather than using it to serve the less powerful that all, whether powerful or powerless, might come to thriving, flourishing.

That's what power is for.

Isaiah sensed some justice in this coming downfall, maybe even some crumb of hope. Though catastrophe laid in the path for the people to something new, though suffering would be

their lot for the next generation or two, it might all though allow them a fresh start, a clean slate. And who doesn't want a chance at these things? Who doesn't want everything fresh as morning dew, unspoiled, unsullied, at least for a moment? And maybe this time, it would last. Maybe this time, there would be no corruption in how things played out.

I was a new mother at the same time a co-worker was one. I remember her once remarking on keeping her baby as pure as possible for as long as possible. Organic cottons, organic foods introduced at the perfect pace: I understood the impulse. She even said to me she'd keep this going as long as possible, keep this purity of his intact for as long as she could.

I doubted it as a project, to be honest. I don't really believe in purity. My Christian faith would have me not.

It's no surprise that Israel and Judah failed to live up to their perfect mission, though the Lord throughout the prophetic texts does seem quite surprised, or at least utterly disappointed, heartbroken, and ready, for this reason, to withdraw divine favor. If the people weren't going to live up to their covenant to be a people of peace, of perfect justice, of care for the poor and the needy in their midst, than neither would the Lord live up to the covenant to provide divine favor, to provide protection, even abundance.

This is a pivotal question in the long conversation that is the Bible. What does divine favor get you? What are we to make of good fortune, and bad? In some books from some moments in history and some human mind making sense of it all, the equation direct. God's favor makes for good fortune, so therefore unfortunate turns mean God has withdrawn that favor, turned God's attention to other peoples or other situations.

In other books from other points in history, this theological equation comes undone. This equation: it faces serious critique. The cross of Christ is perhaps the most pressing a critique of it, for who can be said more deserving of God's favor and good fortune than God's own son? If anyone deserved *not* to get crucified, surely it was Jesus.

So, it can't be as simple a thing as that good behavior brings good reward, which therefore suggests that good fortune means you're one of God's favorites. Indeed, one of the oldest questions in the Bible is to be found in the book of Job, which long predates Jesus' fate on the cross scrambling this neat equation: "Why do the wicked prosper?"

Why, indeed!

And yet there is also this continuing insistence, which must certainly approach the truth, that there are consequences that directly correlate to certain causes. A society founded in injustice

will bear the fruits of injustice. A nation whose policies are exploitative, or dehumanizing, will quite likely suffer some sort of natural consequence for that. I've just been reading essays of George Orwell, who was confident—and proven correct—that the Soviet Union would collapse because of its ideological departure from reality. It was as simple and as inevitable as that. A nation that insists on ideology over against reality will fall. Eventually even its language will be scrambled nonsense, words meant to indicate their exact opposite. This will have things as fundamental as the human mind disintegrate, and once that's taken hold, no one needs to attack such a nation for it to collapse. No painstaking process here of tearing down .It'll happen on its own.

Foundational practices that are themselves unsound make for unsound, unstable playing out.

For what it's worth, this is what the prophetic task was all about. We might think of prophets as people who can predict the future, as a fortune-teller might be believed capable of doing, like with a crystal ball or Tarot cards or a Ouija board. What prophets actually did was read the present playing out of things with an eye for the future. How does what's happening now play out in the future? How do the furrows of society shape things to come when they're ever deeper and more dug in? This isn't some magical reading of the future but a logical gaming out of how things are playing now, seeing where instability is built into the system and seeing how that instability will compound itself, seeing how injustice might serve as a cornerstone and figuring how that injustice will compound itself.

This is what the prophets throughout history were made to do. This is what those so-called slaves in the vineyard of Jesus' parable were trying to do. To tell the truth about how things were going, which the tenants of the vineyard didn't want to hear, the leaders of how things were going who then beat and killed and stoned those prophets.

Isaiah was such a one: quite clear that the wobble that had been introduced in Israel and Judah, these two nations that were to be steady and sound, would eventually create circumstances so out of kilter that there would be no recovery, there would be only downfall. These two nations would fall to Babylon because they were already toppling on their own accord—injustice, inequality, the elite leaving the people behind.

And when they would at last fall (and this is the most surprising thing!), it would be a matter of good riddance. You might even say, as Isaiah did at least suggest, that God had once been with them, attentive to them and lifting up his countenance upon them, but was no longer.

When injustice goes by the name “justice” there needs to be a radical correction, a withdrawing of the sustaining spirit of a place.

And perchance to start anew.

Perchance a clean slate?

Listen to the concluding lines of this reading as it is in Hebrew. The Hebrew word for ‘justice’ is *mišpāt*, and for ‘righteousness,’ is *.šēdāqâ*. So, this is how it sounds with the Hebrew dropped in, “The Lord expected *mišpāt* (“justice”) but saw *mišpāh*, (“bloodshed”); the Lord expected *.šēdāqâ* (‘righteousness’) and heard *.šē‘āqâ* (‘a cry’).”

The prophets were also poets, just as can be the case with some poets in our time, their careful use of words to speak truth being an offence to those whose power relies on words speaking untruth.

The parable Jesus told according to the reading from Matthew that we just heard recalls Isaiah’s understanding of Israel and Judah as a vineyard. Matthew remembers Jesus to have put amidst his parable’s vineyard the very same features: a fence, a winepress, a watchtower. Everyone would have noticed this, the earliest hearers of this parable and of Matthew’s gospel, just as the chief priests and Pharisees in Matthew’s telling did as well.

The church throughout its long tradition has also noticed this, and has taken it as evidence of supersessionism, the notion that Christianity comes to supersede Judaism, the anti-Semitic notion that the Church is now the place of righteousness while the Jews are cast aside, cast asunder. Really, it’s easy to read this parable as being about that. But it’s wrong. This isn’t a parable about right religious branding: which brand of religion do you identify with, and which one is right? This, rather, is about what it’s always been about, bearing good fruits in the world, bearing the fruits of God in the world.

Truly, we followers of Christ were never meant to be “Christian.” We were meant to be Christ-like. And this baptism that Matthew’s Jesus urges upon the apostles to bring to all nations, commissioning the apostles following his resurrection, saying to them, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit...” this wasn’t about imposing a new religion unto an unsuspecting world, religion which has lately devolved into mere ideology. This was about creating disciples, which is to say students in a way of living so that all could have life and have it in abundance, so that nations and even politics could be established on something more stable than what they’re typically built on: power-grabs and shows of force, or the imposition of ideology over and against people’s real experience. These

were to fall away in face of something far more immediate, for more real: self-giving love in service of others so that the world could be a place where people live as they are, receive as they need, and contribute as they can and are called to do.

The problem with the tenants of the vineyard isn't that they were the wrong religion. The problem is that they had ceased to bear good fruit, a phenomenon that, I'm sorry to say, isn't exclusive to any one religion but is a very common problem among people, people of all brands and any sort. People get together and create a politics, and sometimes those politics bear good fruit and just as often the fruits are bitter and thorned.

I've been lately attending a training on a specialized ministry. One subtext of this is that church congregations need to have a purpose that goes beyond their own walls. They need to be about people commissioned and sent *out*, out into a world that's suffering a degrading of its original promise.

I think this is true, or true enough anyway. But I also think churches can be purposeful enough from within their own walls. As long as within these walls there is a spirit of mutual service, a spirit of hospitality, a gathering in of any and all who come through the doors, seeking shelter, seeking sanctuary from a world that is furiously pursuing ends that are misery.

Amidst our way of life, failure is misery, but weirdly so is success. You must never stop working. You must never stop accomplishing. You are never finished with proving yourself. A friend often quotes to me a boy in high school who's furiously trying to get into a "good school." This will have him poised to get into a good law school, which will have him poised to work at a good firm, which will have him poised to become a partner one day, which will have him poised for all the treasures locked in the treasure box that is the corner office. Once asked whether he was happy, he said he'd be happy when he was retired. He wasn't joking. That's honestly how he felt about the life that was yet before him. And this is one of our society's most promising successes.

That is messed up.

I'm not sure if it is purpose enough to be a gathered body with the aim of enfolded in lovingkindness people such as these—people who are suffering failure *and* people who are suffering success. I'm not sure if it is purpose enough to survive, to say nothing of thriving—a congregation prepared to be a shelter amidst such storming headwinds as neoliberalism and late capitalism. It is *brutal* out there. It must be kind in here, kind and compassionate, gentle and generous. And I'm not sure if this is purpose enough, so we can survive, so we can live to see another year, to say nothing of another century. Clearly, evidently, I'm no magician of church growth.

But I can say it is purpose enough for me. Given what we're up against and given what gifts are ours for ministry, it is purpose enough for me to create of this place and in this moment something akin to that Edenic fresh start, where none drag lines of sin-sickness and unsuccess that can't be cut here, where no feelings of loss or being lost can't be given home here, where no dwelling in darkness or despair can't be brought to light and hope here. What goes on out there: there's so little these little churches, little outposts of grace, can do about all that. What we can do something about is whether grace is on offer here.

It is. In my experience, in accordance with my hope, it is.

Which, incidentally, is not a far cry from the purpose to which Jesus meant us to be put. That the sanctuaries in which we gather might disorient us so to reorient us: this isn't just to the effect of feeling confused as to which is the front wall and which is the back. This is to the effect of understanding in faith that the world in which we live and amidst which some of us succeed isn't the world we were made for and isn't the world of our end. We are made for things far more abundant than that. We are made for love, which the more you have the more others have as well.

Come in and remember this, have this recalled to you. Then go out and live it that it might be so.

Thanks be to God.