

## **Eighteen Sunday after Pentecost**

### **Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston**

**4 October 2020**

#### **Isaiah 5:1-7 and Matthew 21:33-46**

Every culture has songs that need no introduction. The moment you hear the first bars or first words, you automatically join in, without a need for an invitation. These songs have become deeply imbedded within the culture, and they are often used as soundtracks of movies, accompaniment for commercials, crowd motivators at sports events, and background to television shows and private parties. In the Mexican culture, for example, “El Rey” or “The King” is one of those songs: “Yo sé bien que estoy afuera, pero el día en que yo me muera, sé que tendrás que llorar.” At this point, any Hispanic, anywhere around the world, would jump in to finish the verse.

In our American culture there are many of these songs. One of my favorites goes like this, (Play from 1:03-2:06 of American Pie): “Bye, bye, Miss American Pie, drove my Chevy to the levee but the levee was dry. And them good ole boys were drinking whiskey and rye, singin' this'll be the day that I die This'll be the day that I die.” The song from Isaiah 5, we read from the Old Testament today, was one such song for the people of God. Just the mention of the first phrase would have been enough for everyone to start singing the rest of the song. Everyone knew this song, regardless if they were religious or not. This was a sad song that beautifully narrated God's heart break over his people's betrayal and ingratitude. I believe the Gospel from Matthew today answers the question left unanswered by Isaiah, but we will get there in a minute.

I remember the old days of radio. DJ's had a tradition of introducing songs with a dedication. In the case of Isaiah's song, I imagine the introduction to say, “This one goes to all of you with a broken heart. It was inspired by the loss of God's true love,” (Adapted from [workingpreacher.org](http://workingpreacher.org) 10/4/2020.) The song starts with the author introducing us to his beloved's vineyard. God, the beloved of Isaiah, “had a vineyard on a very fertile hill.” He did all he could for his vineyard: he lovingly cleared the stones, planted choice vines, build a wall or hedge to protect it from animals, built a watch tower in its midst to defend it from all enemies, and hewed a wine vat to store the delicious wine he expected from it.

This was a considerable expense of time and resources. The beloved went all out to care for his vineyard. But this is what you do when you love another completely. You do not mind the sacrifice, the arduous labor, the patient waiting for the love to be reciprocated. You become like a Spanish troubadour, singing your songs of love outside of a Senorita's balcony. Day after day, you come to sing your songs of love, hoping that one day she will open her windows and come to the balcony to invite you in. This is what

God has done for his vineyard, his people. He has loved them faithfully, waiting day after day for them to reciprocate his love.

But God does not receive the nation's love. He expected it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild, hard, useless fruit. All the work has been for naught. All his love and effort to tend his vineyard, have been wasted. Israel continues to refuse their God. They have scorned their lover. They never came to the balcony to welcome their God. Instead they are producing sour grapes. He expected justice, but instead he has received grave injustice and bloodshed. He expected righteousness and instead he has received the cries of his people groaning under the weight of oppression. Not only has Israel failed to love their God with all their heart, soul, and mind, but they have also failed to love and protect their own people. In fact, they have treated them with wonton disregard for their rights. God expected faithfulness, but he has received sour, illness-producing fruit.

God becomes the speaker in the song. He asks, "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?" The lack of an answer from his people leads God to announce a few punishments. He will remove the hedge of protection that surrounds the vineyard. With this wall down, both animals and enemies will have free access to the vineyard. It will be trampled down, it will be a waste, it will become overgrown, and it will be parched for lack of rain.

Sadly, we know that the people still refused their lover, and it is only when they find themselves in Babylon that they do a forensic examination of what happened to cause them to lose their land, temple, and cities. It is then that they acknowledged their culpability and sin. The great irony is that God does not abandon his beloved, even after they are exiled to Babylon. In due time, he returns them to their land, allows them to build a new temple, and provides new structures of governance.

But the people's disobedience, injustice, and unrighteousness continued. Jesus today picks up the story from Isaiah. He tells of a parable to describe his present day audience. He compares them to a vineyard, and the moment he uses this metaphor, all his listeners would have realized he was singing a well-known song. By using the metaphor of the vineyard, it is as though Jesus was saying, "Bye, bye, Miss American Pie, drove my Chevy to the levee but the levee was dry..." Listen to the similarities between these vineyards: The farmer in Jesus's story planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a wine press in it, and built a watchtower." These are the same movements of Isaiah. This is the same vineyard.

Jesus continues: when it was time to receive his produce, the tenants refused to pay. They rejected their landlord. They failed to treat him with love and respect. He

sent then his prophets (called servants in the parable,) but they killed them and abused them. He sent others, but they were mistreated 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.’” Jesus asks a similar question than Isaiah. He asks, “Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?” The answer to each question leads to judgement of the people’s disobedience. In the same way the pre-exilic Israelites lost their land and temple, the Israelites of Jesus’ day are about to lose the promised kingdom. Jesus says, “The kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom.”

The good news for us today is that God himself answers Isaiah’s question. What else could the beloved do for his vineyard? Well, he sent us his own son, and he raised him from the dead that we may taste infinity. Jesus is the answer to Isaiah’s question, and we are very blessed our salvation is not dependent on us, but on him. If the salvation of our souls were dependent on our good fruits, I wonder if any of us would be able to produce better fruit than the Israelites produced.

I often think of the great conflict between grace and good works. Even though we know that our salvation is not dependent on our good works, because without Christ, the price would be impossible to pay. On the other hand, the entire human race is placed on this planet to care for God’s good creation. We have a responsibility to care for the poor, the widow, the orphan, and the alien. We also must care for the lonely, those who hunger for justice, and those who have been forgotten by the world. Stewardship is the very reason Adam and Eve were placed in God’s vineyard. They were to be their brothers’ keepers; they were to be responsible for producing the fruit that builds the kingdom of God among us. So, how do we reconcile these two principles? On the one hand our works do not determine our salvation. On the other hand, we have a work to do as stewards of our world and keepers of our brothers and sisters.

I think the command to care for the world speaks not of our salvation but of our identity. It does not answer the question “Who will you be saved?” Rather, it asks the question, “Who are you?” The answer is that, as disciples of Jesus of Nazareth, we are stewards of God’s creation. We were placed on this earth to care for God’s world and God’s people. We can sit on our couches to eat potato chips and watch television until we die. But, if we claim to be disciples of Jesus, we must get into that vineyard. We must answer the call. We must till the ground, plant the seeds, collect the harvest, and use that harvest to care for the world. This is what disciples do. It has nothing to do with our salvation. That issue has been solved. Christ died on the cross. The issue now is our identity. Who are we? And perhaps more importantly, whose are we? If we are his, then we have a mission. May God bless us all as we work in his vineyard. Amen!