

August 14, 2016
Isaiah 5:1-7; Psalm 80:1-2,8-19
Wild Grapes
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After I had been in Hawaii for about a year, living with my brother who taught at the University there, my friend Elizabeth and I found a wonderful rental: a little wooden bungalow duplex in an old section of Honolulu. After years of student apartments, it was great to live in my own house again and to have a tiny plot of land. (We also had termites in season, but that's another story, sitting in the dark with the lights out so the termites won't swarm.) Since I was managing a food co-op at the time, I thought I should try my hand at organic gardening. I composted all my leftovers, created a wonderfully rich soil, and among other things, planted green peppers, my favorite vegetable. Soon a plant emerged from my little plot, and I tended it lovingly. It got taller and taller very quickly. Curious, I checked it out in my gardening manual, and it turns out it was not a pepper at all, but a papaya that had flourished from my compost. Oh well. It grew into a little tree in no time, and actually produced some really good papaya; ask my husband.

Sing: Plant a radish; get a radish, never any doubt.

That's why I love vegetables, you know what you're about

Plant a turnip, get a turnip, maybe you'll get two

That's why I love vegetables, you know that they'll come through.

Except I didn't know what I was about, obviously, in planting vegetables because I got fruit.

That song goes on to remind those of us who become parents that when you have children, you never know what you're getting. That's the theme of the wonderful musical "Fantasticks" from which that song comes.

We human beings do like to plan and then to have our lives go according to plan. At least most of us do, most of the time. Others are just born to be different. (Born to be Wild?) Those children will turn into papayas no matter what you think you are doing.

Sometimes it seems as though Scripture makes God in our own human image. God the vineyard owner is orderly and productive, mature and in control. God says I have planted a vineyard: with the choicest soil, and the best transplanted stock, and careful tending. It is so well planned; I have put a watch tower and a wine press in the midst of it. There is no reason for it not to flourish since all the components are so carefully arranged. There is nothing I have not done for its success.

And then, like the fathers in that musical, God discovers that children are different than fruits and vegetables. They are not predictable. They are not obedient. They may not stay in neat rows, but instead grow wild all over the territory. And then what they produce is not just wild, as our translation would suggest, but overripe and fermented and stinky, covering the ground, not worth anything at all. God's vineyard has gone awry in the beautiful land that God gave them.

I don't know the first thing about grape husbandry, though. Anyone here into growing grapes and/or producing wine? Perhaps you can give us more information. Wikipedia tells me that grapes have been domesticated for more than 7000 years, long before God called Abraham into the land of milk and honey. First domesticated in the area of Georgia in the Caucasus Mountains, they ferment naturally because of yeast that lives on their skins. Most fruit that lies around on the ground unharvested will ferment. Grapes were already a valuable crop even before our Biblical story begins.

In America, there are many kinds of wild grapes, but they are of a different genus from the European ones and apparently were never domesticated. Leif Ericson, the first European to visit America, if you believe the legends of Iceland, named the new land he'd stumbled onto "Wineland" after its plentiful grapes. Yet the first colonists tried to import their familiar European variety of grapes, and it was a total failure in the eastern US (more successful later in the far west.) Amazing that for two centuries they kept trying to grow European grapes over and over again without success. In the eastern part of our country, wine grapes only flourished after they made hybrids with the native grapes.

That is a great image and example for our attitude toward human in-migration, I think: the places where people have interbred seem to have the most success. Moving people into a new land

without consideration of local flora and local culture is usually a disaster. It's hard to know what God had in mind, moving all those Hebrew tribes into Canaan.

As some of you may know, the native wild variety of grape is still very much alive in the forests of eastern North America. At our former house in Williamstown, MA, we had nearly an acre of woodland which was overrun by the pesky grapevines and their fruits. They climbed up and covered many of our beautiful hardwood trees. Grapes are very fertile and hearty, and despite much hacking they continued to drop their juicy berries all over, especially on the roofs of our cars. The war against them was lost, and we probably should have paid more attention to finding good ways to use them. As it was, they were a pesky nuisance.

Both the Isaiah passage and the Psalm were probably written about mid-eighth century B.C., a long time after the Hebrew slaves were freed from Egypt and an even longer time since the hybridization not of grapes, but of people. As a student I have long struggled with the reality that God brought his chosen people out of Egypt into a land that was already occupied by other people. Too often in Sunday School we get the image that the Hebrews just moved into this perfect and productive land because it was empty. But it was not. Canaan was a land with many small fortified city states. How much of the Hebrew immigration was slaughter of innocents, and how much was peaceful inter-breeding? Apparently historians have not been able to come to a definitive conclusion either: no doubt there was some military conquest of existing city-states (Joshua fit the battle of Jericho, after all) but there also seem to have been waves of people coming peacefully and co-existing over a period of centuries. This vision of the God Yahweh coming to create a spectacular vineyard for his favored tribe is just that: symbolic. It is a poetic, spiritual view of what actually happened.

If that is true, then what were the Hebrew poets in Isaiah and in the psalms trying to say? That God had created everything just perfectly for the Hebrews, overthrowing well-established city states with a more agrarian economy of grape-growing farmers? And that the effort ultimately failed when it was run over by another set of invaders – here described as God's punishment for his people- because of the contrary and disobedient nature of the Hebrew settlers .

This is a very confusing history, to say the least, and helps us to understand the Middle East has long been a place of meeting and clashing cultures, and the current struggle between groups there

is not at all new, but something that is rooted in centuries of cultural borrowing and conflict and overlay.

So how, then, shall we understand this particular story, about the people whom God punishes because of their failure to grow and thrive like an orderly and productive vineyard? What was their sin, exactly?

The answer is hidden in the elaborate, beautiful Hebrew poetry, starting with verse 7a: the vineyard planting is God's people, God expected justice but instead saw bloodshed; God expected righteousness, but instead heard a cry of distress. Sure, in English we understand the general meaning of those words to say that the Hebrews did not live lives of justice, as Yahweh had demanded of them. But the English version is nowhere near as powerful as the original Hebrew which says:

God expected mish pat but got mispach. God looked for tsedaqah but got tsa'qah. Very very similar sounding words, and Hebrew poetry is based on the internal rhymes or vowel sounds from such words.

This God, who became the first monotheistic God in the Middle East, had expectations of his people. He was not particularly interested in them succeeding through conquest and violence, but rather of thriving in a community because they were living right and lawfully co-existing with others who were more marginalized: the widows, the children, the poor. This was 8th century theological rewriting of the tumultuous ethnic and cultural conflicts in the crossroads of the Fertile Crescent. This was a people looking to live in a new way of equality and justice in the midst of wealth and power.

Yahweh is interested in social justice- mishpat - in right relationship –tsedaqah - in people living together in harmonious community.

What does this say to us now?

As I was casting about for the direction of the sermon, I had already been asked to come up with a title. I'll tell you, after thirty years of preaching, that it's very rare to be ready by the beginning of the week, so I usually look at the text and come up with a label, and hope that it fits the

finished product which comes later. If I could go back and modify my title slightly this week, I'd probably call it something more like "Rotten Grapes."

Somewhere in my subconscious I was back in the days of childhood listening to Aesop's Fables. Remember the VERY short story of the hungry fox, who spies a juicy bunch of grapes growing undisturbed on a high branch and can't wait to gobble them up. Then Fox discovers they are just beyond his reach, no matter what he does. So as he leaves the area, still hungry, the Fox gives his own interpretation: "I'm sure those grapes taste horribly sour, anyway."

And yes, this story is the origin of our modern idiom "Sour Grapes" as a dismissive name for something we want but cannot have.

Perhaps the Hebrew people are a kind of sour grapes for Yahweh. God created a special space and a land for this people and after rescuing them from Egypt thought that they would be grateful and obey the laws he gave them in the Ten Commandments and beyond. The laws were intended to help people live together peacefully, without greed or envy, letting go of the desire for power and wealth in favor of justice and righteousness.

But instead Yahweh's people behaved just as badly as everyone else. Instead of living with *mishpat*, with a proactive sense of justice, they were overcome with a tendency to bloodlust and violence. Instead of living well and within the means God graced them with, they lie and cheat and steal from their fellow human beings, who then sound off with a cry of distress. The widows and the orphans, instead of being cared for by the whole community, are left at the bottom of the heap. These special people that Yahweh brought out of Egypt, intended to be exemplars of social justice, instead are a disgrace, a stinky, fermenting pile of garbage.

Like the very small subtle difference between the Hebrew words, the small differences in behavior are what make the difference in the kind of justice we have in our society. In each moment, choose the option that makes for justice and not injustice. In each moment, choose the option that follows closely in the steps of God, not a path that actually hurts other people and causes them to cry out in pain. Let us be worthy of the gifts God has provided for us.

These concluding words come from the recently passed Elie Wiesel, a Holocaust survivor who became the voice of conscience for us all:

“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 - a Raoul Wallenberg, an Albert Schweitzer, a Martin Luther King, Jr. – one person of integrity can make a difference, a difference of life and death. As long as one dissident is in prison, our freedom will not be true. As long as one child is hungry, our lives will be filled with anguish and shame. What all these victims need above all is to know that they are not alone; that we are not forgetting them, that when their voices are stifled we shall lend them ours, that while their freedom depends on ours, the quality of our freedom depends on theirs.”

May God help us to bear good grapes by caring for the lost, the least and the last among us in every place. Amen.

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 watch-tower 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. God expected justice, but saw bloodshed; righteousness, but heard a cry!

Psalm 80:1-2,8-19

You brought a vine out of Egypt; you drove out the nations and planted it. You cleared the ground for it; it took deep root and filled the land. The mountains were covered with its shade,

the mighty cedars with its branches; it sent out its branches to the sea, and its shoots to the River. Why then have you broken down its walls, so that all who pass along the way pluck its fruit? The boar from the forest ravages it and all that move in the field feed on it. Turn again, O God of hosts; look down from heaven, and see; have regard for this vine, the stock that your right hand planted.

They have burned it with fire, they have cut it down;[b] may they perish at the rebuke of your countenance. But let your hand be upon the one at your right hand, the one whom you made strong for yourself. Then we will never turn back from you; give us life, and we will call on your name. Restore us, O Lord God of hosts; let your face shine, that we may be saved.