

Scripture and Sermon for August 14, 2016

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;
he expected justice, but saw bloodshed; righteousness, but heard a cry!

Luke 12:49-56

[Jesus said:] "I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed! Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division! From now on, five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three; they will be divided:

father against son
and son against father,
mother against daughter
and daughter against mother,
mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law
and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law."

He also said to the crowds, "When you see a cloud rising in the west, you immediately say, 'It is going to rain'; and so it happens. And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, 'There will be scorching heat'; and it happens. You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?"

Let us pray...Amen.

Both of this morning's scripture readings are challenging; in general, most readers of the bible will struggle find a way to accept our Hebrew scripture, because we know that the God of the Old Testament is different from the God of the New Testament because of Jesus.

But what are we to do with the scripture that shows a side of Jesus that isn't the all loving, all peaceful, all accepting savior we've grown to know and love?

That is our challenge for today.

We know that it is not a coincidence that these passages are paired together. In our Hebrew Scripture, Isaiah speaks for God, expressing a deep disappointment over the way God's children are acting.

In our Luke passage, Jesus himself is expressing his own disappointment in God's faithful children.

Is it possible that we are the vineyard Isaiah speaks of? Is it possible that we are the sour, wild grapes instead of the sweet, cultivated grapes God planted? Is it possible that we are the ones who can tell when it is going to rain, but can't act as Jesus would have us act?

At least one theologian thinks what we are seeing in Isaiah and in Luke is what is called 'tough love'. Does that phrase ring a bell? The concept rose to prominence in the '80's as families struggled to manage increasingly difficult behaviors from increasingly difficult children. The idea is that when there are clear and consistent consequences to breaking a rule, and when those consequences are applied with love, the difficult behavior is reduced. I know that this sounds suspiciously like psycho-babble, but it really is a theory of behavior science.

When I was young, (and I know most of you will find this hard to believe) I was a little squirrely. What I mean is, I always seemed to have some extra energy that often put me at odds with the rules my mom and dad wanted me to follow.

My family spent most summer weekends and at least one two-week stretch in New Hampshire, camping. Our property was right across the road from John and Irma Dunn, and their two children, John and Jane. Mr. Dunn and his son owned and operated a Sunoco station in Keene, just a few miles away. Irma was a stay at home mom, running the household, and Jane was still in school when we first began camping there.

Mr. Dunn was a hard-working, fun-loving man, who though strict, had a wonderful sense of humor. He loved to tease me and my brother about all kinds of things, and he always knew how to get us riled up, only to have my mom or dad get mad, and try to calm us down.

One time, things got a little out of hand, and my mom swatted me on my behind. I was probably 8 or 9 at the time. I'm certain she did it out of frustration and maybe a little embarrassment, but it was not uncommon for me to be on the receiving end of the wooden spoon, or her hand.

But in front of the Dunn's, I was embarrassed, and apparently she was embarrassed, because she took a moment to tell me in front of everyone that she did not like having to spank me in front of our friends, but because she loved me, she wanted me to know when my behavior was getting out of hand. She asked me, 'You know I did that because I love you, right?'

And even at 8 or 9, I think I understood. But understanding and complying are sometimes two different things, because a few minutes later, out of sight of my mom or dad, I started right back up again with whatever I was doing to get her mad.

I didn't think anyone had seen me, but I knew I was in trouble when Mr. Dunn spoke up and said: 'Doris, I think your son needs a little more loving!'

All summer, Mr. Dunn got the biggest kick out of telling my parents how much love I deserved! Mr. Dunn has long since passed away, but his wife, Irma, and his children, John and Jane still get a chuckle whenever they tell that story...

Parenting styles have changed over the generations. What used to be common-place has now become rare. What used to be understood as a helpful parenting tool has been de-emphasized and now borders on abuse. As a trained psychologist, I know that physical punishment is the least effective tool one can use to modify behavior, and that the shame that comes with it is far more damaging than we think. But human behavior can still be modified by reward or punishment.

The concept of tough love is based on the fact that human behavior can be modified by both reward and punishment, and that when both are based in love, even the most squirrely kids can learn to follow the rules. But it means we have to be clear, it means we have to do what we say we are going to do, every time.

Isaiah is describing God's frustration with Israel, and God's intent to enact some tough love upon God's children.

Tough consequences intended to modify Israel's behavior.

Luke is describing the frustration Jesus must have felt when he realized that his followers could read the coming weather patterns and adjust accordingly, but could not read the spiritual patterns that should have led them to behave differently.

And it is true to this day that there is tremendous division among those of us who call ourselves Christian: Christ's prediction of such a division remains true. Whole denominations disagree on some of the most basic of Christian ideals.

For Christ, it is never ok to deny someone access to the table. But many denominations practice what it known as 'closed communion', meaning only certain people may receive the elements of Christ's body and blood.

For Christ, it is never ok to ignore or demonize the least of God's children. But many of the world's poor and impoverished are blamed for circumstances that are beyond their control, and are punished for their poverty.

For Christ, it is never ok to turn away an immigrant who is in need. But there exists today a growing hatred of those who are in this country illegally, and there is even a candidate for the president of the United States of America who thinks it is good to build a wall to keep the needy from entering our country. Jesus would weep.

For Christ, it is never ok to hold a grudge, or refuse to accept an apology. But in an increasingly selfish world, Christians remain unforgiving. Some of our biggest celebrities are known for their unforgiving nature, and they're even more popular because of it!

We can tell when it is going to rain, or when a heat wave is upon us. And we can act accordingly: get the umbrella, close the windows, turn on the fan or the air conditioning.

But why can't we act in accordance to our Christian values? Because understanding the rules and complying with them are still two different things...

A lesson I was exposed to at 8 or 9, but one that I am just beginning to understand now....

If we are the vineyard, planted lovingly, nourished tenderly, protected fiercely, and yet we yield sour wild grapes, what is God to do with us?

When I was 16, on my birthday, I went out onto Washington Avenue, which is my hometown's Route 11, and I applied for about 20 jobs. The next day, I was hired at a small, self-service gas station. I would sit in the little booth, and turn on the pumps when people paid, then I would take the money, make the change, and basically run the station. Sometimes I opened the store, and I would have to measure the gas in the tanks with a giant measuring stick, sometimes I would have to close the store, which required both measuring the tanks, counting and locking up the money, and setting up the drawer for the next business day.

One Sunday morning, early, while I was just turning on the pumps, after I had measured the tanks, a long, shiny, white Cadillac pulled into the station. Nobody got out of the car, so I started taking inventory of the candy and stuff. The car beeped, and the driver motioned me to come out of the booth. Now, I wasn't supposed to leave the booth, I was locked in, and any time an employee left the booth, it increased the chance that there could be a robbery. If you never left the booth, nobody could ever get in to rob the place.

But it was early Sunday morning, nobody else was around, so I went out to see what they wanted.

The window rolled down, and a middle-aged man said, 'hey buddy, can you pump my gas for me?' I said, 'well, I'm really not supposed to, this is a self-service station.'

He laughed and said 'look, if you fill up my tank, I'm going to pay with \$50.00 bill, and you can keep whatever change is left.'

I looked around, and the street was deserted, nobody was around, so I agreed, and started pumping his gas. When I was done, I had put about \$20.00 worth of gas in his car, leaving me with about a \$30.00 tip. When I told him it was \$20.00, he gave me a \$50.00 bill, and he asked 'hey buddy, do you recognize me? I'm the grapes, I'm the grapes in the Fruit of the Loom underwear commercials!'

We have to decide what kind of grapes we want to be: the cultivated grapes God intended us to be, the sour, wild grapes most people end up being, or the grapes in the Fruit of the Loom underwear commercial!

If we are Christians, if we have Jesus as our guide, and we still participate in denying people their basic and fundamental rights, what is God to do with us? If we are Christians, and we don't offer the refugee comfort and asylum, what is God to do with us? If we are Christians, and we don't act to eliminate poverty and inequality, and injustice, what is God to do with us wild grapes?

Tough questions. Tough love.

Each of us is challenged to find ways to express our faith by the way we act, by the way we treat others, by the way we select our political leaders, by the way we support certain causes, by the way we support our church, I mean God's church....

And each of us will ultimately be the recipients of God's tough love. Not because God wants us to be sad, or hurt, or embarrassed, but because God loves us, and wants us to yield the best we can possibly yield.

And each of us will most likely fall short of God's expectations...it seems like that is just the way we were made...but we must try. As a church, as a faith family, as individual children of God, we must try to be the harvest God expects. We must try to see what Jesus wants us to see in the spiritual times, and act accordingly.

Because we all could use some more loving...just the gentle kind...the forgiving kind...Amen.