

St Mark Sermon:
Oct. 3-4, 2020
“Lessons from a Vineyard”
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Lectionary Readings

First Reading Isaiah 5:1-7

“I will sing for the one I love a song about his vineyard.” (Isaiah 5:1)

Psalm Psalm 80: 7-15

“Return to us, God Almighty! Look down from heaven and see! Watch over this vine.” (Ps. 80:14)

New Testament Philippians 3:4b-14

“But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ.” (Philippians 3:7).

Gospel Matthew 21:33-46

“Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit.” (Matthew 21:43)

Grace to you, and peace through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Sermon in a Soundbite

Here is the lesson from Isaiah’s ‘Song of the Vineyard’: be grateful for the vineyard you have been given and show honor by producing wholesome fruit for its rightful owner. It is entirely human to consider our surroundings, vocation and even our families to be of our own making. Isaiah delivers the divine lesson of the vineyard: our château is a gracious gift from a loving God. The ingathering is all his. It’s harvest time; are you ready to show him your produce?

“I will sing for the one I love a song about his vineyard. (Is. 5:1)

Pray

I. Introduction: The Beauty of the Vineyard

Over the past decade, Sue and I have attended more weddings in vineyards than churches. Contemporary weddings tend to be more about scenic photo shoot than serious covenant making. Before I drift to pull apart that trend, let me acknowledge an entirely agreeable point: *vineyards are beautiful.* The stately straight rows are perched on hillsides; often near lakes or coastline.

Wineries- grape farms- look like flower gardens. Vines change with the seasons. A vineyard is quaint & earthy yet subtle & sophisticated.

The Song of the Vineyard begins softly and smoothly in Isaiah. Its melodic beginning is inviting. It sings as a love poem. It comes to us like an invitation to attend a vineyard wedding. Then, the song turns sour.

II. The Historical Lesson of the Lectionary Readings

The beloved owns a vineyard on a fertile hill. As owner, he knows its history. He cleared the land of stones and brush, he prepared the soil, planted the vines, pruned the trunks, trained the canes, built a watchtower, constructed a hedge to keep out varmints and vagabonds, cut out a rock well to press and process its grapes. He grants his chosen people a vineyard lease as a turn-key operation. The vineyard song rings of generosity, grace, creative care, and thoughtfulness. Its lyrics convey expectancy, hope, and images of fruitfulness. The vineyard is ready; let the growing season begin. All the requirements for high yield are in place.

Sadly, this idyllic vineyard contains a tragic flaw. The operation is dependent on those who run it. The vineyard is subject to the whims and wishes of those entrusted with its resources. The fruit of the vine is brought forth by the hands of the laborers. On who's table will it be served?

The Lord comes to the vineyard to collect the harvest. It is his vineyard but he is treated as if he showed up for the feast with no invitation. The lines in Hebrew read like poetry. The Lord looks for justice, but discovers bloodshed; he seeks righteousness, but is confronted with cries of distress. Is this really my vineyard?

When the Lord looks for the fruit, he is not merely looking for gain. The Lord cares *how* those gains have been achieved. He's not looking for results at any price. He considers *how* the workload is shared. There is no glory in profit won by fierce or cutthroat competition. Cheating, deception, and fraud are never acceptable. The Lord expects ventures where justice flourishes and bounty is a blessing to all who participate.

When the Lord does not receive fruit that honors his glorious name; he removes the vineyard's defenses. He withdraws his preserving favor. The tough love lesson is obvious. Its import must be relearned generation after generation. The vineyard only produces good fruit under the radiance of its owner.

The historical lesson of the vineyard is unequivocal. The nation of Israel was given a vineyard but did not produce fruit pleasing to the Lord Jehovah. The lectionary blends together passages that accent this historical lesson. Isaiah turns the ballad of the vineyard into a tragic tune: judgement comes.

- Ps 80: The psalmist prays for restoration of the vine and refers directly to the nation of Israel. The psalmist makes a plea for the Lord to turn his face (that is his favor) towards them. Like a vineyard needs sunshine; nations need the Lord to shine his blessing on their activities or the watchman watches in vain.

- Phil 3:4b -14 Paul lists his accomplishments as a Jewish religious leader of his day but counts these merit badges as nothing. Paul recognizes that righteousness is the prize that brings glory to the kingdom. Paul presses for this prize by turning away from presumption, entitlement, and the privilege associated with his status. Paul pleads humbleness and places reliance on the cross. It is the fruit of grace from Jesus' life, death and resurrection that Paul offers back to the Master of the Vineyard.
- The Gospel of Matthew tells us about the Gospel of the kingdom. The friction between Jesus and the Jewish religious leaders heats up as passion week approaches. Just before his entry into Jerusalem upon a donkey, he speaks boldly and unabashedly to those religious leaders. Jesus expands on Isaiah's song of the vineyard. Jesus weaves the activity of the prophets into the storyline and places himself into the parable's narrative. The tenants of the vineyard kill the son of the vineyard owner when he comes to collect his due. Direct historical fulfillment follows this foretelling.

III. The Song of the Vineyard revives the Motif of Creation

It would be regrettable to allow this parable's fulfillment in redemptive history to deafen our ears and miss its fresh lesson. The Song of the Vineyard is for the congregation of St. Mark. Let's hear the Lord as if he were speaking to us. He is.

This vineyard love song powerfully reflects the creation narrative. The Lord pulls a physical universe out of vast nothingness. Galaxies are born. The Triune God has mastery over the chaos. He separates sky, sea and land. As he moves over the face of the waters, he organizes a prosperous place for life to take hold. Plants appear, animals come alive, and eventually, he shapes the pinnacle of his handiwork; an image bearer with god-reflective capacity who can imitate his abilities and communicative power. His special creature is placed where? In a pristine Garden. Human beings have the freedom to oversee the creation given to them with one restriction. They must keep the line between themselves and the Creator intact.

What happens when the Lord comes to check on his garden after Adam & Eve ate of the forbidden fruit? There is no justice or righteousness. Instead, he discovers brokenness, selfishness, and shame. Adam & Eve's performance as garden keepers is a preview of all vineyard keepers who lose sight of the Lord's garden gift. Human beings strive to be their own god.

IV. Lessons of the Vineyard

How do you envision your role in his vineyard? We may think of the vineyard as our nation. The United States is a blessed nation. God has shed his grace on America. It is not hard to imagine what the Lord sees today when he looks for the fruit that his people bring forth as they serve his kingdom under the favorable conditions of living life in this nation. "This land is your land; this land is my land...actually this land is the Lord's. Its bounty is a blessing of the Lord. Instead of looking broadly, what do you envision as your vineyard? Our vineyard is the people in our sphere of influence for whom we care.

In his seminal book *On Becoming a Servant Leader* (1996) by Robert Greenleaf wrote: “The work exists for the person as much as the person for the work.” There is a relationship between our *labor* and our *identity*. This is a matter that needs further attention in an era of alienation. This is a big word that describes what happens as human being become removed from the product we contribute to producing. For the believer, there is another way of saying the same thing: *our work is worship and worship is our work*. When this intersection is no longer feasible; it is time to change one’s workplace.

V. A Vineyard Saint

Sue and I enjoyed a memory recently about a woman we loved who embodies the concept of vineyard keeping. Mrs. Cornell spent her prime years as the school principal and teacher in a small three classroom/K-8 school. She found herself a widow at an early age. She gave herself to the children in the village as if they were family. The little rural school eventually merged into a larger school district. Her forced retirement followed. Defeated? Never. There was no withdrawal or slowing down. She founded a preschool in our church. Those preschoolers became her vines. Those kids were loved on for an entire year and entered “real” school ready to succeed. The beauty of her vineyard did not end there. She rallied seniors to do projects, called upon them show up to help kids, drive others to doctor’s appointments. Without any title, salary, authority, or prestige, she was a social service agency and head start executive all wrapped up into one. Mrs. Cornell poured herself into serving her small home town. Yes, those of us in that rural community benefited from her vineyard care. Our twins are the produce of her vineyard. She grew fruit pleasing to the Lord. A saint to inspire saints.

Where’s your vineyard? What is it producing? Here are a few tips.

- 1) *Imagine your vineyard as the people you nurture.* The people in your life come from multiple spheres. Your neighbor, your cousin, your business colleague may be your vines. Remember, despite frustrations along the way, vineyards are beautiful.
- 2) *Approach your labor with praise.* No matter where you work or what you produce, be grateful for the blessing of your vocation. Seek his favor on the work of your hands.
- 3) *Prune appropriately.* Practice wise discipline over the resources under your care. Off season is pruning time. Eliminate waste and time wasted. Keep your attention on how to achieve the best quality, long-term results.
- 4) *Plan purposefully.* Set priorities. Have a strategy. Keep focused on your ministry vision.
- 5) *Enhance your vineyard respectfully.* Improve your vineyard as the Lord allows. Don’t abuse its resources or the others with whom you partner. Produce an honorable crop.
- 6) *Enjoy its bounty mutually.* The Lord is seeking to rejoice over righteousness, love, and wholeness. Take others with you; share the blessing.

VI. Application: Give the Song a new ending

This is harvest season. The Lord will come to visit his vineyard. He may ask you to give him a tour. He may want to see the fruit of *your* labor. The people around you are that vines he delights in. Show him how you assist them to produce fruit. The Lord looks for justice, so show him with

transparency your acts of cooperation, fairness, and respect; he looks for righteousness, and you can show him gestures of kindness, patience, and sharing bounty.

My loved one had a vineyard on a fertile hillside. He dug it up and cleared it of stones and planted it with the choicest vines. He built a watchtower in it and cut out a winepress as well. Then he looked for a crop of good grapes and when [fill in your name] gave him a tour, the Lord was pleased with the fruit of the harvest for justice and righteousness poured forth in abundance.

Lord, may it be so in our vineyards.