

Vineyards  
Matthew 21:33-46, Isaiah 5:1-7, Psalm 80:7-15  
October 8, 2023  
First Presbyterian, Luling

Despite the sermon title, I'm going to start with something else entirely. Shepherds and sheep. It's a metaphor that we're familiar with, when we turn to Scripture. It runs through both Old and New Testaments. David the shepherd boy, the 23<sup>rd</sup> psalm along with several other psalms, Ezekiel's description of the good and bad shepherds, Jesus's identification of himself as the shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep. All, or at least most, of those scriptures are familiar to us. There are approximately a jillion hymns having to do with a divine shepherd and human sheep. There are famous paintings and sculptures about Jesus as the good shepherd. We like this image, we're comfortable with it, and it's faithful to the whole Bible. And. It doesn't ask a whole lot of us. In this image, especially as we like to think of it, we get to wander around being sheep, not particularly clever, not endowed with free will or decisions or responsibilities. The shepherd takes good care of us. And we need that, desperately. Goodness knows we need to be taken care of. That's all true and good.

There's another metaphor, maybe not quite as frequent in Scripture, but well referenced and also spread throughout the Old and New Testaments. As you might expect from reading the title and listening to the scriptures Beth and I read, it's the image of the vineyard. I would speculate that the Garden of Eden is related to this metaphor, though I haven't found anyone else speculating along those lines. But it's definitely in the prophets, like the Isaiah passage we read. And the psalms, like we read. And the parables, like several we've read in the last few weeks. And in the words of Jesus, which we spoke in the call to worship: I am the vine, you are the branches.

This repeated and extended metaphor of the vine and branches and vineyard and God and people is set up consistently through the Scriptures. The owner of the vineyard is God. Like any owner of any agricultural land, God wants the vineyard to be fruitful and productive. The vines within the vineyard are God's people. God's people were planted, or transplanted, or placed somehow by God, in this vineyard. Often in the Old Testament, this vineyard is a symbol of the Promised Land, and the people are God's chosen people. The Gospel of John further refines the metaphor a bit. God is still the owner of the vineyard, and the people are still the vines, but Jesus, the divine and human one, is the main vine,

and the people are the branches. The purpose of the vineyard, always, is to bear good fruit.

The Isaiah passage isn't very familiar to us, I don't think, but it would have been quite familiar to Jesus's audience as they heard the parable. God did absolutely everything to make this vineyard fruitful: dug it out, cleared out the rocks, planted it with the very best vines. Yet instead of grapes, it yielded wild grapes. That "wild grapes" term is obviously a little unclear. This is the only place it appears. But if you've ever tried to eat a Mustang grape straight off the vine, as compared to one that you get in the grocery store, you're able to tell the difference. This fruit that the vineyard produced was substandard, a disappointment in every way. In verse 4, you can hear the disappointment: what more was there to do for my vineyard that I have not done in it? God has given the vineyard, the people, the best, and they can't meet God's expectations for being fruitful. Everywhere God looks, there is bloodshed instead of justice and crying instead of righteousness. The chapter goes on to describe the oppression of the vulnerable. The fruit from this vineyard, from God's people, is not justice and righteousness, as God had hoped and longed for.

The Psalm also depicts God as clearing the land and planting the vine of the people in the Promised Land. God cared for the vineyard as it grew larger and larger. But now, the walls have broken down and it isn't protected. The Psalmist asks God to again protect the vineyard, the people. The Psalm doesn't speak of the fruit of the vineyard, except to say that passersby are stealing it because it is unprotected. The vineyard seems to have forgotten its purpose, as they think God has forgotten them.

This metaphor and image, along with these two specific passages, and perhaps others, are in the background of the parable. The audience for the parable, like the past several we've looked at, is the religious authorities in the Temple. They for sure knew the vineyard tradition from the Scriptures they studied. This parable isn't easy to understand or hear. It starts off: "There was a landowner who planted a vineyard." The landowner sets up the vineyard for success, with a fence, a wine press, and a watchtower. Sounds just like the Isaiah passage, so far, yes? The audience was surely thinking, "Oh, we know this story. We know how it goes. Wild grapes, not good, disappointed landowner." But then the landowner becomes an absentee landlord. A bit like the Psalm now, with an abandoned vineyard.

It comes time to collect the harvest from the tenant farmers. The tenants had apparently tended the vineyard well and it had produced good fruit, enough

that the landowner wants to collect the harvest. First the landowner sends some slaves, but the tenants beat and kill the slaves. So the landowner sends more. Same thing happens. Finally, he sends his son, a little inexplicably, but he believes that the tenants will surely not mistreat his son in the same way. But they do. In turn, they inexplicably think that the vineyard will somehow become theirs if the son is out of the picture.

The landowner's expectations and hopes are disappointed, to understate it significantly. Jesus asks the religious authorities what they think will happen next? They say the landowner will put the tenants to death and entrust his vineyard to some new tenants. Jesus then indicates that the vineyard is the kingdom of God, and it has not produced the expected and hoped for fruits, and it will be taken away from them and given to a people that "produces the fruits of the kingdom."

Good grapes is not the same as good fruit. And a good harvest of good grapes that is kept all for yourselves is not good fruit. Good fruit, like in Isaiah, has to be fruit of justice and righteousness, and these tenants, and the religious authorities, have not produced justice and righteousness.

I'm suspicious that we don't write too many hymns about the vineyard because we're concerned about our fruit, or our lack of fruit. Despite God giving us everything, including the only begotten Son, we can't quite make our vines produce consistently good fruit. Our vineyard is full of bloodshed and crying, rather than justice and righteousness. Israel and Palestine, the promised land of the vineyard, is full of bloodshed and crying this weekend. But that is far from the only place where humans are failing to produce the fruit of the kingdom of God.

Our vineyards need tending, vineyards near and far. We need to look carefully at the fruit we are producing and seeing if it is kingdom of God fruit. Are our vines yielding justice, or bloodshed? Are we cultivating righteousness or weeping? We are God's sheep, yes, and God is our shepherd and takes care of us. But that's not all we are. We are God's vineyard, and we have work to do, vines to tend, fruit to nurture, neighbors to serve.