

“God v. The Vineyard”

Rev. Dr. Peter Bynum

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¹Let me sing for my beloved my love-song concerning his vineyard: My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. ²He dug it and cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines; he built a watchtower in the midst of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it; he expected it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes.

³And now, inhabitants of Jerusalem and people of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard. ⁴What 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?

⁵And 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. ⁶I 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.

⁷For 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! (Isaiah 5:1-7)

Hear ye, hear ye, hear ye! The Court of Creation is now in session. All those who have business before this honorable court give your attention and ye shall be heard!

First on today's docket is the matter of Yahweh (a/k/a Jehovah, a/k/a the Lord of Hosts) versus The Vineyard. Standing as plaintiff, and speaking through the prophet Isaiah, is the Lord our God. The defendants, the people of God's vineyard, certainly include Israel, but the class also extends well beyond that to the church of Jesus Christ and all other people of God.

This mildly antiquated language is still used to open sessions of court all over our nation. Though it may seem out of place here, I use that language this morning because this passage from Isaiah is an example of a common motif in the Bible known as the Covenant Lawsuit. It is a literary device, used primarily by the prophets, that sets forth a complaint, a claim, a beef that God has with humanity. God has gifted Israel with a beautiful vineyard – a land of promise, flowing with milk and honey. But that gift has been mistreated, disrespected, neglected, and misused. And now, God is demanding justice and accountability. God is requesting a judgment – are the people guilty or innocent? “And now,” the passage reads, “inhabitants of Jerusalem and people of Judah, render a judgment between me and my vineyard.”

As in any lawsuit, the aggrieved party begins by presenting their case. And in this lawsuit, the opening statement is a love song. A sad love song... or, as the old country hit would say, it's “another somebody done somebody wrong song.” But a love song nonetheless. “Let me sing for my beloved my love-song concerning his vineyard.” God gave the people the land of the vineyard as a gift of love, but that gift did come with some strings. There were expectations about how the people would use the land, how they would manage the vineyard: that it would be an honest place and a straightforward place.... that in that place they would love and honor God, and love and honor one another as neighbors... that in that place strangers and aliens and widows and orphans would be cared for... that in that place murder would not be tolerated... lying and false witness would not be tolerated... the sabbath day would be kept holy. The Vineyard had laws and expectations. This was the deal, and it had always been the deal.

And one side of that deal had been kept. God had faithfully kept the divine side of the bargain. The vineyard God had given them was not just good. It was very good. The land was fertile, able to bear good crops. The land was on a hill, which was not only the best place to grow grapes, but it was



also safe and secure from dangers. And last but not least, God had cleared out the troublesome rocks and hindrances. He had built a high tower for the people to live in. God even planted the vines for them. "What more could I have done?" God asks. "I have kept my end of the bargain. I have done everything I promised to do and more."

By contrast, the inhabitants of that land had obviously not fulfilled their end of the bargain. Without remorse or repentance, they had repeatedly broken the terms of the covenant, the contractual deal God had struck with them. What had God wanted? Good fruit: faithfulness; righteousness; kindness; goodness. Good fruit! That's what God always wants from us. "Watch out for the fakes and the posers," God says. "Watch out for the false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves."¹

And how can you tell the difference? How will you recognize them? By their fruits. Good trees bear good fruit. Bad trees bear bad fruit. And it is not hard to know the difference. Rotten fruit is obvious to the eye. It is also obvious to the nose. You don't need to hold a bad piece of fruit or taste a piece of bad fruit to know it is bad. When it is bad, we can see it, and we can smell it. God had given the people a good land, a fertile land ready to prosper, and God rightly expected that vineyard to bear good fruit. But what had God received in return. Sour grapes. Bitter grapes. Dry, withered grapes. Bad fruit.

And God, in making this case, claims that there are two very obvious ways that the fruit of the people had turned bad. The first one is bloodshed. "I looked for justice in my vineyard," God argued, "but I saw bloodshed." The violence being perpetrated in the vineyard was extreme, overt, and unapologetic. Vulnerable people – the same ones who were meant to be protected and defended by the covenant law – were dying.

And the second obvious sign of bad fruit was like the first: cries of pain. "I expected righteousness from my vineyard," God told the court. "But all I heard was a cry for help!" Cries of grieving mothers and fathers. Cries of hungry children.

With those words, God rests the divine case. The evidence is overwhelming. It should be obvious. So obvious that, did you notice, the people of the vineyard are invited to be the judge and jury? And we can see why. The people offer no rebuttal witnesses. There are no alibis, no explanations, no mitigating circumstances. They say nothing in their defense. God is so confident that the case is so ironclad... that the truth of what is happening in the vineyard is so clear and so undeniable... that he allows the defendants to render judgment against themselves.

You know, we talk a lot in this church about the love of God, and we do that for good reason: because the very nature of God is love... because God is love. God leads with love, God closes with love, and God loves at all points in between. So it is good and right for us to talk about how much God loves us. But it is wrong, and it is a real mistake, for us to forget about the **expectations** of God. This is why the prophets are so important – why they were important thousands of years ago, and why they remain just as important today. The prophets are there to remind us of God's expectations... the standards of justice and righteousness by which we are all called to live. We have received this Vineyard – we are given the lives we live, and the places where we live -- out of God's abundant and steadfast love for us. But the Vineyard has laws and expectations. There are things we are supposed to do in the Vineyard, and things we are not supposed to do in this Vineyard. This is the deal, and it has always been the deal.

And it is abundantly clear that God has a case against us right here, and right now. When we think about the original Vineyard, the nation of Israel, it is impossible to deny that it is a place where bloodshed is commonplace, a place where cries for help and cries for distress are heard

¹ Matthew 7:15-20.

daily, hourly, even minute by minute. In Gaza, entire communities have been destroyed, and nearly the entire population has been displaced. The health care system has been leveled, and medical workers are being killed while tending the wounded. I understand that this is a complex and highly charged subject, but we have to find ways to speak with our neighbors and friends, ways to speak with humility and love about what is really happening there.

I feel the same way about the Vineyard of America. With each passing day, we are becoming more and more of a police state. The language of politics has become a language of hatred, vengeance, retribution, and mockery. We have far more than our fair share of bloodshed in this country, and I fear that we are becoming numb to the cries for help being raised by our own neighbors. We have to talk honestly about these things, because God does have expectations about how we are meant to challenge and rectify these kinds of injustices. We have been given much, and God expects us to produce good fruit. And right now much of our fruit is undeniably rotten.

Do any of you remember in the 1970's, when you could go to McDonalds and get a Happy Meal or something, then for a small additional amount you could buy a promotional souvenir glass with a Looney Tunes character on it? We had some when I was growing up – Bugs Bunny, Tweety Bird, Pepe le Pew. They were cheap, but to me they were so cool. If any of you are feeling nostalgic, you can get the whole set on eBay – all 18 glasses -- for \$747 dollars plus shipping.

Anyway, the comedienne Paula Poundstone remembered these souvenir glasses in one of her more memorable jokes. As a little girl she remembers accidentally knocking one of them off the counter and causing it to shatter all over the kitchen floor. Her mother, clearly very upset, said, "See, this is why we can't have nice things!"

That joke has endured, but, in this passage from Isaiah, it is no laughing matter. God has provided the people of the Vineyard with wonderful things – good land, good homes, everything we need to be productive and healthy. But God has given us these good things with the expectation that we will use them to produce good fruit. And when we ignore these expectations, or think that they do not matter, there does come a point when, in God's view, we can no longer have these nice things. When we do not use the gifts the way God intended, they will begin to fall into ruin. The Vineyard will dry up, become overgrown, trampled down, covered with thorns. And we, as the people of the Vineyard, will not be as strong, safe, productive, or happy. And it is no one's fault but our own.

Hear ye, hear ye, hear ye! The Court of Creation is now in session, and the Lord our God has a legitimate complaint, a very solid case. We as a people have been given life, land, wealth, and opportunity. What are we doing with it? God wants justice, but we are choosing bloodshed. God wants righteousness for people who are crying out in pain, but we as a people are not just choosing oppression, we are celebrating it. Cheering it. The foulness and stench of the rotten fruit is undeniable. God's closing argument, which is well supported, is that God has held up the divine end of the bargain. The problem is on our end. "What more could I have done for my vineyard?" God asks. "All I want is good fruit, but what I am getting is wild, sour grapes."

So now, people of God, what is our judgment? How do we plead? And what will we do?

Amen.