



## Words of the Prophet Isaiah 5:1-7 NIV

I will sing for the one I love a song about his vineyard: 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, but it yielded only bad fruit.

“Now you dwellers in Jerusalem and people of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard.

What more could have been done for my vineyard than I have done for it? When I looked for good grapes, why did it yield only bad?

Now I will tell you what I am going to do to my vineyard: I will take away its hedge, and it will be destroyed; I will break down its wall, and it will be trampled.

I will make it a wasteland, neither pruned nor cultivated, and briers and thorns will grow there. I will command the clouds not to rain on it.”

The vineyard of the LORD Almighty is the nation of Israel, and the people of Judah are the vines he delighted in. And he looked for justice, but saw bloodshed; for righteousness, but heard cries of distress.

### A Time of Prayer

#### Joys and Concerns

#### Pastoral Prayer

Creator God, we come before you asking prayers for those who lead nations, cities, churches, homes.

As you poured out your love in the Word may we hear your word and follow; may the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts lead us to you.

Holy One, we come before you - a people broken into shards of lives sick, poor, hungry - hidden by the limitations of our eyes.

Help us to see as You see as you poured out your love in the Word. May we hear your word and follow may the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts lead us to you.

God of Mercy, we come before you – seeking to live as you command, but often failing, and thus we are torn by cries of despair, anger, power, control - lost to foolishness and stumbling blocks despite your love in the Word

Help us to hear your word and follow May the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts lead us to you.

Gentle God, we come before you giving thanks for all our blessings the gift of life, hope, faith, love, family, friends - all we care for this day. Help us to be Your hands.

Incline Your heart, O gracious God, and teach us to love O Christ, our rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

## **Hymn            *What a Friend We Have in Jesus*    573**

### **Gospel Lesson    *Matthew 21:33-46* NRSVUE**

“Listen to another parable. There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a winepress in it, and built a watchtower. Then he leased it to tenants and went away.

When the harvest time had come, he sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his produce.

But the tenants seized his slaves and beat one, killed another, and stoned another.

Again he sent other slaves, more than the first, and they treated them in the same way.

Then he sent his son to them, saying, ‘They will respect my son.’

But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, ‘This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance.’

So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him.

Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?”

They said to him, “He will put those wretches to a miserable death and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the harvest time.”

Jesus said to them, “Have you never read in the scriptures: ‘The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord’s doing, and it is amazing in our eyes’?

“Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces its fruits.

The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces, and it will crush anyone on whom it falls.”

When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they realized that he was speaking about them.

They wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowds, because they regarded him as a prophet.

## Message – Bearing Fruit

Fall is definitely in the air. While the last week or so has been a little bit of leftover summer, the telltale signs are there: the leaves are starting to fall, there's a crispness to the evening air, and storms and rain have made their first appearance. The change of seasons means getting out those comfy sweaters and jeans, and putting away the shorts and summer wear until next year. For those of us who are not big shoe fans, now we have to actually wear socks, and bid a sad farewell to the flip flops and sandals of warmer weather. The end of summer has always been a significant time for people throughout the ages. It's the time of the final harvest of the growing season in most places; the time when the last crops are gathered and the plants prepared to go dormant for the winter. It's a time to celebrate the rewards of months of hard labor in tilling, planting, and caring for one's precious crops. Particularly in the hilly, rocky, thin soil of the Near East in Palestine, this would entail clearing the ground of tons of small stones, and building terraces to hold one's crops. Many of our human festivals and religious observances throughout the ages have coincided with this period of harvest and transition.

Both of our scriptures this week reference this imagery of a vineyard and the harvest. In that part of the world in ancient times, much of the work of farming was performed by tenant farmers, people hired by the landowner to do the hard work of making the land productive. In return, they would be allowed a portion of the crops produced, while the rest would be given to the owner. The more one was able to keep for oneself, naturally the more well-off one would be. Likewise, the better, more productive crops one raised, the greater the reward. In an ideal world, this arrangement would benefit both parties. The tenant farmers would be blessed with a secure place to live, with a guaranteed source of income to provide for their needs, and the landowner would receive an income from his land holdings to also sustain the needs of himself and his family.

However, as is usually the case, the ideal is rarely the reality when dealing with humans and human imperfections. Greed and self-interest are certainly nothing new; they've been a part of us since day one. When one side or the other does not care for the well-being of the other, the system fails to benefit both. Both of our scriptures today make use of allegory to make this point. They use this vineyard imagery to symbolize the relationship of God to the people, and how that relationship sours when the proverbial vineyard is not managed properly.

In Isaiah, God prepares the perfect vineyard to produce a good crop, cleared of stones, planted with choice vines, and protected by a strong defensive hedge with a watchtower. Yet when it comes time for the harvest, instead of premium fruit, it yields wild sour grapes that have little value. The grapes, symbolizing humankind, God expected would demonstrate justice, but instead brought bloodshed, would show righteousness, but instead led to cries of lament. God responds to this bad crop management with the promise to remove the protections and favorable conditions that have allowed the vineyard to thrive, and let it wither as one does with failed crops.

Jesus builds on this imagery in his parable in our gospel reading. In his story, the crops were successful, yet the problem lies with the tenants. When the time comes to share the fruits of their labor with the landowner, they greedily keep everything for themselves, killing off each set of messengers sent by the landowner, including the landowner's own son. Like the first story, this one is also rife with symbolism. The landowner again is God. However, this time, Jesus is engaging in debate with the temple authorities who are challenging his authority. He tricks them into filling in the ending of the story with a vengeful retribution towards the tenants by the landowner. After falling into this trap, they realize that the tenants in his story are themselves. They see God giving them the authority to care for the people, yet they use this gift for their own ends, and when God sends them messengers, prophets, they shun or destroy them in favor of their own self-interests, even condemning God's chosen messenger, the Messiah.

Clearly these scriptures are full of meaning on several levels, but today I'd like to focus on how we bear fruit in the context of our own vineyard today. Like the priests of Jesus' day, God has provided a vineyard for us to manage. What are the fruits of our labor? When we think of the church, what is it that comes to mind? Is it a vibrant, verdant field of new growth and possibilities, constantly open to the new revelations that God's modern messengers bring, or is it an institution that seeks to conserve accumulated dogma, and maintain the reigning social order that sustains it regardless of the potential injustice of that system?

Unfortunately, too often our minds are made up about the grasp we have on truth. We come to this parable knowing we know God through Jesus Christ, and we have spent centuries honing the fine details of that relationship through study of every nuance of scripture and the doctrines developed from that study and our traditions. We anticipate what God will say to us based on what God has already said to us; no less than those who have gone before us, we have mistaken certainty for faith in the living God. We seek God in prayer certainly, but often we view divine revelation as ending with the biblical canon, and its limits imposed by human design.

How much are we like those tenants in Jesus' parable? How much do we place our value on numbers in the pews, the size of church finances, and the comfort of our worship space? What fruit does that produce? To quote our sisters and brothers in the United Church of Christ, "God is still speaking." We may have chosen to focus on a set list of ancient texts for revelation, and they can be informative, but God never works by our rules. The landowner still sends messengers to us. They may not look like the prophets we expect, but prophets they still are: the homeless that camp out in our community, sometimes at our door, those who struggle with addiction, people in our community who struggle against racial discrimination and injustice, those in our midst whose sexual or gender identities often lead to them being outcast and unaccepted in God's vineyard.

There's a story of a time before refrigerators, when people used ice houses to preserve their food. Ice houses had thick walls, no windows, and a tightly fitted door. In winter, when streams and lakes were frozen, large blocks of ice were cut, hauled to the ice houses, and

covered with sawdust. Often the ice would last well into the summer. One man lost a valuable watch while working in an ice house. He searched diligently for it, carefully raking through the sawdust, but didn't find it. His fellow workers also looked, but their efforts, too, proved futile. A small boy who heard about the fruitless search slipped into the ice house during the noon hour and soon emerged with the watch. Amazed, the men asked him how he found it. "I closed the door," the boy replied, "lay down in the sawdust, and kept very still. Soon I heard the watch ticking."

Often the question is not whether God is speaking, but whether we are being still enough, and quiet enough, to hear. Do we really listen to hear God speak? Do we recognize the messengers God sends us? We often lament the dwindling size of our churches and the smaller and smaller gatherings for worship. The question we need to ask ourselves is what is the fruit we are producing? Is it nourishing and what those who hunger seek and need? Or is it what we find comforting and familiar?

Like the tenants in our gospel story today, we have a choice. We can embrace and welcome those messengers sent by God and the revelation they bring, or we can choose to turn away and stay in our own comfortable bubble. But what if God is to be found outside the bubble? What kind of fruit can we produce on our own? I hope and pray we can turn our attention outwards, and seek to find God still speaking and at work around us in this time, in this place, recognizing that revelation is not just a book written 2000 years ago, but an ongoing event from a God whose work is never done.

Amen.

## **Call to Serve**

We are invited to share our blessings generously with our church, community, and world. By sharing our gifts freely, God will be honored and glorified in our giving. So, let's give with joy in our hearts from our abundant blessings so that others may be blessed.

## **A Time for Reflection**

### **The Prayer of Thanksgiving**

Faithful God, we bring these gifts before you to celebrate how you have made with us, your chosen people, a new and everlasting covenant through the death and rising of your Son. Do not allow us to become proud of being the people you love, but help us to be worthy of your trust and to give you a response of deep faith expressed in service. Grant this through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

**Hymn**

***This Little Light of Mine***

**401**

## **Benediction**

Creator God—as we return now to our homes, workplaces, and communities, may Your Spirit open our eyes anew to the vastness and splendor of Your beauty all around us.

May we hear, and smell, and see, and touch Your glory evident in all of Your creation.

Above all, let us see Your beauty even in the brokenness of our brothers and sisters—all of them, created in Your image, and waiting to experience that redemption that Comes only through Christ Jesus our Lord. We go now to love and serve our Lord—Amen.

## **Postlude**