

SOUR GRAPES

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Isaiah 5:1-7

I have always liked growing things in the yard, especially things I can eat. The first house that I owned was out from town. I owned a couple of acres at the top of a hill. It was an old property where people had lived for over a hundred and fifty years. The soil was good and as I began to mow the yard, I discovered what had been old garden plot. So, I tilled it up and planted a garden there and it did well. I had tomatoes and squash and peppers and watermelon. I remember going out one day and filling a five-gallon bucket with tomatoes. It was far more than I could ever eat.

At the next house, where Courtney and I lived after we got married, the entire property was shaded by huge maple trees. A vegetable garden was out of the question. It was hard enough just getting the grass to grow.

At our current house, we've got the sunlight, but the soil is poor. It's mostly clay. I figure that after the house was built that they brought in a thin layer of dirt for the lawn. I've tried developing two different garden spots but with no luck. We've learned to be content with containers on the patio.

However, I still carried in my head the memories of five-gallon bucket harvests of tomatoes, so, a couple of years back, I decided to construct a raised bed for tomatoes. I chose a spot; I bought the lumber; I fabricated an 8-foot by 4-foot frame and filled it with what they called raised bed soil mix.

Excitedly, I planted my tomatoes and the plants grew nicely until the bugs attacked. I watched as maturing vines withered overnight. By the time I found the right herbicide, it was too late. The crop was lost.

The next year, I tried again. And the plants were showing promise when the deer invaded and turned my dreams into their personal salad.

The next year, it was squirrels who showed up. As you know, they will pick a green tomato and then take a couple of bites for the water inside. They leave the mangled fruit on the ground where you can see it and weep.

The year after that, I refused to set myself up for more disappointment, so I let the bed go fallow and it produced a bumper crop of weeds.

This year, I decided to give it one more shot. So, early in the Spring, I cleaned out the bed, brought in some more soil. I worked in compost from the compost pile. I fertilized. I put in posts and erected deer netting all the way around. I got a dog and

trained him to chase squirrels (which he excels at). And then, with the hope that springs eternal, I put six plants into the ground: two Better Boys, two Beefsteak, and two Celebrities.

It's been my experience that in Middle Tennessee tomatoes start to ripen around the 4th of July. I would love to stand here and report that Courtney and I are enjoying fresh, luscious, home-grown tomatoes every day. But I would be lying. All I've got is six sad, spindly plants that aren't a whole lot bigger than when I bought them.

I took photos of the bed and showed them to the tomato expert at the nursery. He told me the problem this year was the heat. He showed me his plants and they didn't look much better. But that is small consolation for all my effort. I'm trying to decide what to do. Do I try again next year, or do I just tear the whole thing down? As I've long suspected, gardening is just a never-ending war with nature.

Our reading for today was written by the prophet Isaiah in the 8th century BC. The passage starts off as an enchanting little song about a vineyard. *Let me sing for my friend my love-song concerning his vineyard.*

The song tells the story of how this friend created a wonderful vineyard. It was located on a hill with fertile soil. He tilled the soil and removed the stones. He planted the best vines. He constructed a watchtower in the center of the vineyard. From the watchtower he would be able to keep an eye on his crop. He could watch for thieves or any animals that might eat the plants. He could keep his vineyard under constant surveillance. Also in the vineyard, the farmer dug a vat to place his harvested grapes as he prepared to turn them into wine. It was a wonderful, perfect vineyard. You would expect it to produce excellent grapes.

But, like my tomato bed which hasn't yielded me any tomatoes, the vineyard doesn't produce good grapes. The farmer expected it to yield delicious grapes. But instead, it produced sour grapes. Our translation calls them "wild grapes" but that is not accurate. They were rotten; they were rancid; they were inedible and unsuitable anything, even wine.

Although our passage begins with Isaiah singing about his friend, the owner of the vineyard, the narration quickly changes. It switches from Isaiah to the owner himself. And this person invites the people of Judah to pass judgement the failure of his vineyard. It would be like me turning to you and saying, "Tell me. Am I to blame for my tomato woes?" It's an honest question. Am I the one responsible for there not being a crop year after year? Have I done something wrong? Have I been negligent in some way? How many of you are master gardeners? How many of you are farmers? How many of you presently have tomato vines groaning under the weight of their fruit? You can judge!

In the reading, the owner says, *Now, inhabitants of Jerusalem and Judah, judge between me and my vineyard.* He says, *I did all that I could.* He asks, *What more could I have done?*

And then the vineyard owner contemplates the same question that fills my head: What now? I've poured my heart and soul (and wallet) into this failed raised bed. What do I do? Do I keep it and try again? Or do I just tear it down?

The vineyard owner says, *This is what I am going to do. I'm going to tear down the hedges around vineyard and let the wild animals in to devour the plants. I'm going to pull down the wall and allow anyone to walk through and trample the vines flat. I will let it go and let the weeds and briars and thorns take over.* And then, the owner adds, *I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it.* Ahh. Now, we see that the owner of the vineyard is more than a simple farmer. It is the one who has the ability to control the rain. It is the Lord.

If God is the farmer, then the vineyard becomes something more. It is creation. Or, at the very least, since he is speaking to the Jews, it must be the land of Israel and Judah. But nonetheless, God is the creator.

Isaiah concludes this passage telling us that the vineyard is indeed the nation of Israel. It is God's chosen people. But when God created their land, God expected his "vineyard" to grow something special. He wanted it to produce justice and righteousness. But it didn't. Instead of justice, God found bloodshed and violence. Instead of righteousness, God heard the cry of oppression. The grapes in God's vineyard were rancid. They were grapes of wrath.

And that's what we learn here. That God created God's people for them to toil for greater things—for justice and for righteousness.

Too often today we think of justice as being vindication and retribution—you know, an eye-for-an-eye. "They hurt me, so justice demands that I hurt them back." But that is not God's justice. God's justice is balance. Think of the legal profession's symbol of lady justice holding the scales. Justice is ensuring that everyone has an equal chance. Justice is making sure that the powerful do not oppress the weak. Justice is leveling the playing field for every person.

Last week, when we looked at the first chapter of the book of Isaiah, we heard God's lament that while the people were worshiping him in their temple, that they did not worship him beyond the temple. God said that God could not abide the people's worship despite their sacrifices and burnt offerings. Unless the people seek to make right all that is rotten with the fallen, sinful creation, temple worship was hollow and just an annoyance to the Lord.

In that first chapter, God's challenge is that the people *cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.*

In other words, pursue justice and righteousness in all that they do for all people. That is the true worship of the Lord. This is what pleases God. That is the fruit that God desires from his vineyard.

In his commentary on the book of Genesis, the Reformer John Calvin observes how God originally set human beings on the earth to share the blessings of creation in such a way that all had enough to meet their needs. Calvin wrote, “Any inequality which is contrary to this arrangement is nothing else than a corruption of nature which proceeds from sin.”

Over and over, the Old Testament prophets protest the corruptions of society that serve to keep the poor in a state of helpless dependence while the rich continue adding to their abundance. As the prophet Amos proclaimed, *Let justice roll down like waters, And righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.*

So why should we work for justice and righteousness? Because God calls for it? Yes. But also because when we work for justice and righteousness, we are faithfully anticipating God’s restoration of the world.

In our reading today, it sounds as if God decides to demolish the vineyard because it was not fruitful. But actually, what God says is that God will only remove the protections—the hedge and the wall—and let nature take its course. With sin there comes judgement. God must judge.

However, the history of scripture is that God continues to act for our salvation. Isaiah’s name itself means ‘God will save.’ The prophets continue to call us to salvation. God calls us to salvation.

But ultimately, it is Christ who comes to us as God, who offers the ultimate act of salvation in his own destruction. Because of our sins, because we were not the fruit that God hoped for, God removed the protections from Jesus and allowed him to become the vineyard—trampled and devoured—so that we may live, so that we may have another chance at salvation, so that we may learn to embrace justice and righteousness in all that we do. God judged.

As a church, as a community of God’s people, let us always commit ourselves to justice and righteousness in God’s name. Let us do all we can to ensure that all people flourish. Let us live righteously. Let us be fruitful.

And one last thing. I have decided that I will give my raised bed one more year.