

"Not Every Vine Will Produce"

Isaiah 5:1-7; Matthew 21 :33-41

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus

September 28, 2014 – 16th Sunday after Pentecost – Rev. Ronald Botts

At this time of the year the people are harvesting grapes in Israel, as they have done there for centuries. The first buds appeared on the vines last March, blossoms followed in April, then the grapes mature from July until now. The picking of the crop is going on currently and will continue through late November.

The soil over there has always been favorable to the growing of grapes. That's why the vine and its fruit have such rich symbolism in the life and religion of Israel. We see repeated references in the scriptures.

Jesus also drew many of his parables from this common crop: The Parable of the Vineyard rented by the tenant farmer; the Parable of the Fig in the Vineyard; of New Wine in Old Skins; of Laborers in the Vineyard; and in the Parable of the Two Sons.

Next week we will celebrate World Communion Sunday and, through it, recall Jesus' referring to himself as "the true vine." Christ then took the cup filled with juice and shared it among those seated with him, as was the custom of generations of Jews as they gathered for Passover. Yet he added words which gave a new significance to the act: "This cup is God's new covenant sealed with my blood, which is poured out for you." The Passover wine thus became the sacramental new wine of communion.

Today's Old and New Testament readings are both vineyard parables, though I want to concentrate today on the older one from Isaiah. It's a short story of a man who "had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. He 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; [now] he expected it to yield [choice] grapes, but [instead] it yielded wild grapes."

This bit of Scripture is poetic in form and reminiscent of a festal song to celebrate the harvest; but it turns somber rather than celebrative. It is more tragic than heroic.

On good land choice vines are planted. Great care is taken and the vineyard is well-tended. Instead of the intended and expected results, the land only produces wild grapes—small and bitter and of no value. The disappointment for the farmer is obvious.

The hearers are then invited to concur with the judgment passed on the vineyard: "Now I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard [for it is a disappointment to me]. I will remove its hedge, and it shall be devoured; I will break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down ... it shall not be pruned or hoed, and it shall [become] overgrown with briars and thorns."

What else is the owner to do? Why waste good resources on something that has shown it can't produce. It's a disappointment, but nothing further can be done here. No amount of

extra tending or fertilizer now can make any difference. The harvest, what there is of it, isn't what was expected and what should have been able to grow there.

Indeed, what else can the farmer do? What is reasonable in this circumstance? Why throw bad after good? Which hearer of the story would disagree? It's time to move on to a new place with new vines, in the hope that another vineyard may produce the desired results. There is no sign of promise here, nothing to show possibilities for a better future. The owner decides to let the field and its bitter yield go, though he had such high expectations. It only makes sense. Who would not affirm that decision?

The parable continues, however. "For the vineyard of the Lord is the house of Israel, and the people of Judah are his pleasant planting; he expected justice, but [instead] he saw bloodshed; he expected righteousness, but heard only a cry [from those oppressed]."

What is the Lord to do in such an instance? Here is a covenantal relationship that has gone sour, not because of anything that God has done or failed to do. Here is a favored people who have forgotten their special relationship, and have produced a society of discord and malice instead of justice and righteousness.

Everything has been given to them, but look at the disappointing results. Is not the Lord justified in abandoning the people because it is they who have turned their back? They show no evidence of regret, no sign of improvement. Their actions are unfaithful.

This ancient story is an allegory that can be brought into our time and our situation. We can understand God's disappointment with humanity when we recall similar experiences that we have had.

Many parents have labored and sacrificed for their children, provided them with the best circumstances they could, only to harvest a disappointing crop. Teachers have poured themselves out day after day for their students, only to find failures abound. Pastors, priests, and rabbis have known failure among the people whom they serve, and see little to show for all their efforts.

Presidents and governors and mayors have put forth high ideals and noble programs, only to harvest wild grapes because of corrupt underlings or a citizenry who doesn't share this greater vision. A friend puts her faith and trust in another, only to be rewarded with selfishness and betrayal. Yes, we understand a bit of God's disappointment in the vineyard of Israel, for the same is regularly found within the human family.

Some years ago the Los Angeles Dodgers signed a young ballplayer directly out of high school to a bonus contract. He was primarily an outfielder, but he had the natural talent to play almost any position. The fellow had all the attributes: he could run, he could bat, he could throw. Every year his skills seemed to grow and he had a promising career ahead of him. This was not just an average rookie, but one who "major league" stamped all over him.

So the Dodgers assigned this young prospect to one of their lower minor league teams to get needed experience so that he could rise quickly. A surprising thing happened, however. He spent the next three years at that same farm club, and never managed to show anything more than mediocre performance. His statistics were unimpressive and, in the end, his work

habits undermined him. The Dodgers had high hopes for this young man, but no amount of coaching made an impact. After three years they released him, unwilling to invest further in his career.

Grape vines are a lot like people. They breathe, eat, drink, and reproduce. A grape seed is a dormant plant which, under the proper conditions, awakens and germinates. As it absorbs moisture, it swells. This activates the plant's enzymes and enables it to utilize food reserves within the seed.

Roots push deeply into the soil to anchor the seedling and to forage for water and minerals. These elements are taken in through thousands of tiny hairs and conducted to the stem. Once the leaves sprout, the plant become independent of the seed for nourishment, and instead relies on the soil and atmosphere for the raw materials to manufacture its own food.

What happens when grapes turn bitter (or wild, as in the parable)? Many things can go wrong. Too little rain or too much. It may be too hot or too cold. The mineral mixture may not be right. Insects or blight may attack it. Air-borne pollution may take its toll. Many factors contribute to the success or failure of a crop. The same holds true for humans as well. At times all people fail in some aspect of life; for some, their whole life seems like a failure.

No solution to this dilemma is offered in the parable. The lesson is really one of acceptance and perseverance, just as God has shown with humanity. We disappoint and fail, yet the Lord still cares about us. Despite everything, we are still loved.

If one's child turns out to be a disappointment, despite our best efforts, we must sadly come to accept it. We can still love them. If students refuse to learn, it doesn't mean that the teacher should r become despondent. She must care about them, continue to encourage, and accept the situation while still hoping for a better outcome.

Throughout our lives we are challenged to accept the reality of the way things sometime turn out, and to make the best of great disappointments. To become stuck in guilt or self-pity or remorse for what we were unable to prevent or change does nothing but to debilitate ourselves. The truth of life is that we must accept failure as well as success, whether it is our own or another's.

It is sad, to be sure, when "crops" fail, and there are any number of reasons why they do, but once the grapes have truly turned sour there isn't much that can be done at that point to sweeten them. A person has to accept the way things turn out and continue to hope for better harvests in the future.

This parable reveals that God was bitterly disappointed in the people of that time, and probably still is with us. Yet God loved them, and we are assured that God loves us. Can you and I learn to do that as well?