

Isaiah 5: 1-7  
Psalm 80  
Matthew 21: 33-46

Violence in the Vineyard  
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The pictures from the media are all too familiar. Makeshift memorials with mylar balloons, flowers, a teddy bear. Candles are lit. Photos and names are posted or read. We do this, time after time, on the spots where one human being takes the life of another. This spot, this moment is the reminder of pervasive violence, visible and invisible.

And then, the way our media works, the next picture we see is of a Hollywood star on the runway, or an ad for an exotic trip, or some link that will take us to the next scandalous gossip. Violence, victimization, hunger, homelessness, greed, conspicuous consumption, corruption -- these realities sound all too familiar. So is our ability to recover from the shock, and to keep on with the ways things have always been; to cling to old habits, even when they are not working.

As people of faith, as Christians, we turn to this kind of gathering, this kind of community for both solace and purpose. We turn to our Scriptures, which have so often comforted us in the past. But today, I have to say, we do not read so much of consolation, as of judgment. And we can never read any of the "judgment" passages without first seeking to apply them to ourselves. It's no good saying, "Well, that was just the ancient Israelites, or the Jews of Jesus' time." That's too easy. If we are going to read them, then let them speak. To us. Let us go to the vineyards, even though it's not our natural habitat, and hear what God has to say.

At first we are lured in by the lyrical nature of Isaiah's words: "Let me sing for my beloved a love song..." This is going to be beautiful, right? This is harvest time, we are going to hear about grapes and wine and love. And so we enter into the lovely metaphors of the fertile hill, and the hard work of the owner, preparing for a rich harvest of love. Elsewhere in his prophecies, Isaiah compares God to other kinds of human laborers, such as a silversmith, a beekeeper, or a potter. These blue-collar metaphors suggest divine solidarity with one of the most basic realities of human experience, work. And there's something reassuring and comforting about this. God is generous, God is patient, God is building us a future. Since the vineyard has been planted by God, it represents the gift, grace, and love of God. Yet the vineyard also demands the labor of the farmer that enables it to produce grapes that yield wine. Thus it symbolizes the human response: personal effort and the fruit of good deeds. A potentially beautiful, loving relationship.

Naturally the Beloved expected grapes after all that work. But we are told that the vineyard yields wild grapes, or more accurately, rotten fruit. We must assume that God's people have been given the freedom to respond to God faithfully, or not. Such freedom is absolutely necessary for true relationship or love (remember, the passage begins as a "love-song") -- to exist. But it is precisely the people's freedom that means things can go wrong, and they do. All of this is important for understanding the tone of judgment in this passage and the prophets in general. Judgment is not God's need to punish or to get even with the sinful people. Rather, judgment is the set of destructive consequences that result from the people's own choices. God is essentially gracious.

As the passage goes on, the prophet makes clear what he means about the rotten grapes of dashed expectations: “He expected justice, but saw bloodshed; righteousness, but heard a cry!” We miss some of the poetic power of the original here, with harsh rhyming and alliteration: *mishpat u-ine mishpach; tzadaqah u-ine tzaqah*.

The New Jewish Publication Society has a translation that captures something of the effect:

He hoped for justice,  
But behold, injustice;  
For equity,  
But behold, iniquity!

A harsh accusation: God's own people have chosen a system that creates victims and evokes their cries for help. Later, in verses 15 and 16, it becomes clear that, although the poor are directly victimized, everyone eventually stands to lose when justice and righteousness are not lived out and embodied. Everyone loses when the vulnerable are not protected. Everyone loses when our environment is exploited. As author Mary Pipher says, “We have cared more about selling things to our neighbors than we've cared for our neighbors. The deck is stacked all wrong and ultimately we will all lose.”

Jesus knew the book of Isaiah well, as did the chief priests and the Pharisees in the Jerusalem Temple. That metaphor of vine or vineyard would have immediately resonated. And so vineyards turn up frequently in Jesus' parables, as the setting for the Kingdom of God. Something new is ready to take root, some new possibility of interaction with the divine. Work in the vineyards could be difficult, wages could be unpredictable, landlords were often absent. It turns out that violence is always a possibility as well. It turns out that Jesus was not afraid to name violence when he saw it. He tells a story to point a finger directly at the perpetrators of violence against God and God's people. They are the religious leaders with power. In our time they would be church people who work hard to hold onto their traditions, church people who assume that they are the only ones who know what God thinks, church people who are afraid to lose it all as this counter-cultural movement starts to spread.

There are two kinds of violence in this story. The tenants are those religious leaders: the arrogant ones who want the vineyard for themselves, even though it belongs to God. The vineyard is the people of God, the community of faith. Three times the owner of the vineyard sends messengers to collect his produce. Three times the tenants use intentional, actual physical force to cause harm and even death. Beating, insulting, refusing to turn over the owner's share: this is a mutiny, an attempted coup, a struggle for power. And then there is murder. This is the obvious violence, the visible violence in the story.

But there is a hint of deeper violence in this story. First, the vineyard owner distrusts the outside community so much that he needs a fence around his vineyard. You could say that a fence is practical to keep out animals, but maybe it is more than that. He lives in a world that does not expect trustworthiness or honesty. He lives in a world of alarm systems because of those bad people out there. He lives in a world where a wall might keep out foreigners. He builds a watchtower out of fear of being attacked, out of a need to prepare for expected violence. Guess what: we live in that world too. We build fences and walls because we are afraid. We are afraid we will lose something that we think is ours— in the story it is property. But it can be power, authority, money, even life. Let's build a wall to keep out the bad guys, we say. It really has never worked. In our self-righteous thinking, we forget that there are always bad guys on the inside as well.

How do we seek the Kingdom of God in a world of such violence? First of all we can name it, see it, recognize the evil, and refrain from turning the page when it becomes uncomfortable. Then, we can look at what God is doing, and we can look at what is surprising. In the parable, it is the gracious, persistent action of God that is surprising. After all, what vineyard owner would put up with this? Call in the police, call in the army! But, after all of this violence, abuse and murder, this owner does something wildly unexpected... he sends his son to give the greedy, abusive, wicked tenants another chance. God is always the giver, the one who offers grace. Even to people mired in violence. Though his listeners say, "He will put those wretches to a miserable death...", Jesus never indicates that God wants this kind of vengeance. All God wants is people who will produce the fruits of a peaceable kingdom.

So what can we say, today, about the violence in **our** vineyard? Once again, there is more than one kind of violence in our world. Acts of visible violence are the fruit of those processes of structural violence, like discrimination or profiling. And there is pervasive cultural violence, like poverty, racism, and the conscious or unconscious demeaning or negative judgments we constantly make about people and actions. And we accept it. We are willing to live with it. We don't stop to think about the despair of groups or communities which do not have a place at the tables of power. We accept the violence of extreme poverty and what that does to a person's soul, how that shapes a child's world-view. We are willing to live with a few racist remarks from people who should know better. We assume that repeated violence is the norm and when the next memorial of candles and photos and teddy bears goes up down the street we are not even surprised.

The attack at a country music festival in Las Vegas that left at least 59 people dead is the deadliest mass shooting in modern US history...unless you count the East St. Louis Massacre of 1917 with the killings of more than 100 American-Americans, or the Colfax Louisiana massacre of 1873 with the killings of 60-100 American-Americans or the 1890 Wounded Knee Massacre that left more than 200 Native Americans dead. But even if we speak of our own times, there were six other mass shootings in America in the week leading up to October 1. (Mass shootings are defined as four or more people shot in one incident, not including the shooter.) We have to admit that violence is in the DNA of our nation. No other developed nation comes close to the rate of gun violence in America. Americans own an estimated 265 million guns, more than one gun for every adult. Data compiled by the Gun Violence Archive reveals a shocking human toll: there is a mass shooting –every nine out of 10 days on average. That's the world we are living in. That's what we seem to be able to tolerate. So how can we produce the fruits of the kingdom?

Violence permeates deep down in our culture and we must name it. We can see its effects. So where will we find the kingdom of God at work in the midst of a violent world? We will find it in God's workers inside and outside of the vineyard who take their responsibility to care for all of God's people seriously. We will find it in people who refuse to be arrogant. We will find it in people who share power and invite others to the table. And yes, we will find it in those who protest. I hope we will find the kingdom of God in people like you and me, even though we live in a world filled with violence. We can be the ones who say, "Enough!" As Martin Luther King, Jr. said, "Returning violence for violence multiplies violence, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars." Returning peace for violence says, "Enough!" We certainly have enough darkness. We certainly have enough disappointed hopes; enough spoiled fruit. Let us seek the justice and righteousness of God. Amen.