

Proper 15 - 12 Pentecost – Year C – August 18, 2010 - Homily
Isaiah 5:1-7; Psalm 80:1-2, 8-18; Hebrews 11:29-12:2; Luke 12:49-56
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One of the most beautiful images that permeate the Scriptures is the vineyard, and particularly the idea of YHWH as the viculturist, or in broader terms, the master gardener of all creation. Later, in the Gospel of John we read about Jesus as the true vine and God as the vine grower. In John 15: 5, 8, we come to understand Jesus as the vine in which we grow and bear fruit: “I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. ... My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.” Tonight’s reading from the prophet Isaiah begins as a love song to God about His vineyard. It quickly turns into a parable, and ends with words of exasperation, shattered expectations, and God’s judgment.

Interestingly enough, a vineyard is often characterized by its “*terroir*”, which according to Wikipedia is a French term loosely translated as “a sense of place”. For a literal vineyard that would refer to the specific geographical and geological characteristics of the plantation. The soil and other factors of the area where the vineyard is planted become a part of the flavor in the wine. From a spiritual perspective, let’s look more closely at this whole passage from Isaiah, bearing in mind that it is a love song about the vineyard that God has planted, and also bearing in mind our own “*terroir*”, our own sense of place in God.

Having heard the reading, we already know the surprise ending that the vineyard is the house of Israel and Judah are YHWH’s special planting. We know that the vine grower is God. In other words, through the prophet Isaiah God is describing how disappointed He is in this people and their behaviors. God has given His chosen ones everything they could possibly need to remain faithful, and consequently to live faithfully with justice and mercy. Since you and I are grafted into the house of Israel by virtue of God’s grace and our faith in Jesus Christ – we too are expected to live righteously and justly, bearing God’s good fruit in all we say and do. How do you think the Israelites felt when they heard this poetic tribute to YHWH’s loving kindness and attentiveness to their every need, and then are called to judge between the reality of their lives and God’s desires for righteousness and justice? Do you think that they were aware that their relationship with YHWH had gone so array? The voice of God speaks through the prophet Isaiah to let all of us know that God will not condone continued violence and oppression.

Now, as in all the ages, God grants people who deny God’s will the autonomy they assert. That is what our loving God will always do, because love “does not insist on its own way” (1Cor 13:5). Yet, God does not give up on any of us. God is still the master gardener waiting for us to repent, to turn around, and begin to yield good fruit in God’s service. Clothed in Christ’s righteousness, you and I have become accustomed to living in the blessed assurance of God’s grace. Let’s be clear here about the meaning and expectations around God’s grace. As German theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, so grace-fully wrote, there is no such thing as cheap grace. In the ongoing context of the vineyard, our reckless sinfulness turns good soil into useless dirt, producing only the equivalent of thorns and briars. Grace *is* a gift of God. Grace *is* offered freely for those who truly desire to turn their lives around, and to align their wills with God’s will. Baptist minister Dr. Vance Havner said it like this, “Grace is free, but it is not cheap. People will take anything that is free, but they are not interested in discipleship. They will take Christ as Savior, but not as Lord.” As this passage from Isaiah shows, God expects a response from each of us to His steadfast love. The word

“expected” occurs three times in this short passage, all in relation to God’s disappointment with the response to his lavish graciousness. The beginnings of discipleship include that yearning for a closer relationship with God. In turn, that yearning animates our awareness of the still small voice of the Holy Spirit guiding us into all righteousness and Truth.

At least one of the points of Isaiah’s prophetic message for you and for me is to consider our own fruitfulness in the vineyard that we now know extends by God’s grace in Christ Jesus to the whole world. The quality of the grape, the fruit of the vine, is impacted by its “*terroir*” or sense of place. This is true especially in terms of the weather during the growing season, soil minerals and acidity, and pruning method. Let’s translate some of that for our own spiritual journey and transformation in Christ. Our sense of place in relationship with God in Christ can also play a significant role in our own fruitfulness. As Christians, our growing season is essentially year round. Over the years, many of us have got into the habit of taking summer and the season after Pentecost as less important than other seasons like Advent, Lent or Easter for example. Not so! All the seasons of our lives in the community of Christ’s Body are important. This season, sometimes called ordinary time, is particularly fruitful for growth in many aspects of our faith. If we accept God’s good gift faithfully, and use the time well, we will not be disappointed.

The next question to ask ourselves is whether we are in an environment that offers us nourishment to grow. Is this place, this community of faith good soil? Do we have nutritious preaching and worship, Bible study and prayer, service opportunities and other ministries that meet our spiritual needs in order for us all to produce fruit in Christ’s name to the glory of God? The last part of the specifics that give us a sense of place in Christ is about pruning. God will help us with that, but it also takes discernment for us to reflect on our growth, and on those aspects of our faith that are passing away or need to be pruned away. Pruning can be painful, but it is also a way to facilitate fruitful growth. Pruning helps to redirect our energies, and our spiritual gifts more effectively in God’s service.

God’s steadfast love, grace and faithfulness as our viticulturist is part of our new covenant in Christ Jesus our Lord. According to the best practices of vine growing, the duties of the viticulturist include monitoring and controlling pests and diseases, fertilizing, irrigation, and deciding when to harvest and prune the vines. This is God’s providential care, described in the reading from Isaiah as the way that God lovingly plants and cares for the vineyard. It is like the answers to our prayers when we find ourselves in distress, and the every day gifts and blessings that we enjoy. God invites us all to reflect on other ways that God helps us with troublesome pests and dis-ease in our lives. How God feeds and waters us in the Body and Blood of Christ, and how the entire measure of our lives is in God’s control. American playwright, Tennessee Williams, has a delightful way of encouraging us to return to the Lord, rest, and remain in good relationship with God in Christ Jesus. He says, “Oh, you weak, beautiful people who give up with such grace. What you need is someone to take hold of you - gently, with love, and hand your life back to you.” If we really want to “get a life” as the saying goes, then we really want to turn to Christ Jesus, our Lord and savior.

Amen.