

From the Stump, New Life
The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
Rev. Jennifer M. Gingras
November 17, 2019

Isaiah 5:1-7; 11:1-5

Some of you know all about grapes. Many of you are connoisseurs of fine wines. Have you ever seen the grapes being harvested? Farmers have these massive shakers that go down the rows of the grapes and the fruit would fall off and then truckers would take the grapes and deliver them to the people who would crush them, strain them, and turn them into wine.

The people of Israel also knew all about grapes. One of the three harvest festivals was the one our Sunday School students just learned about last month, the festival of booths, Sukkoth, which recalled the wilderness wandering of the Hebrew people and the grape harvest. It was at this festival, so scholars believe, that Isaiah the prophet rose to offer the prophetic poetry Liz read for us today, the *Song of the Vineyard*.

It seems to begin innocently enough as a love song. Think of a tune sung by the best-man at a wedding feast. He is singing of his beloved friend, the groom, praising the bride whom he calls a vineyard. As the song goes on, it is clear that the farmer loves his vineyard; the groom loves his bride.

That is why everything is done for the vineyard with great care and love. The farmer puts his vineyard on a high hill — I guess the best grapes grow on well-drained, sunny hillsides. The farmer then cleared the soil of stones, hoed the weeds and even built a watchtower in the field, something from which to scare the birds away and make sure that the insects didn't get into the crop.

He built a wine press and then waited for the harvest. The expectation was for good grapes to produce good juice and fine wine.

But then comes a discordant note to this song--the grapes are sour, the juice undrinkable. The prophet asks his hearers to judge between the farmer and his vineyard, between groom and bride, lover and beloved. Just who is at fault here? What has happened?

Isaiah's time was not so different from our own. Things seemed to have been settled in Israel, the people were reasonably prosperous and at ease. What was not so obvious was the injustice and corruption hiding in the

shadows, the violence and deceit lurking behind the seemingly peaceful façade.

It is clear from the conclusion of the *Song of the Vineyard* what was really going on in Israel--instead of justice there was bloodshed; instead of righteousness, the cry for help.

God is the farmer, groom, and lover. Only God can command the rain clouds not to rain. God has done everything for the people of Israel. God saved them from slavery in Egypt. God brought them through the wilderness, fed them with manna and water from the rock, and brought them into the Promised Land, the land of milk and honey.

But the people had forgotten that the Lord was kind and merciful to them, so they should also be kind and merciful to others. The Lord had blessed them with peace and plenty so they could share with others from their bounty. The Lord had given them great blessings and they returned thanks to God by living lives of wickedness, violence, injustice and oppression.

And yet, there doesn't seem to be a call for repentance here! Just the contrast between what the farmer had done and now what the farmer would do. In the past, the farmer had done all he could to nourish and sustain, protect and prosper that vineyard. Yet it had not yielded good fruit but sour grapes.

In the future the farmer would remove the hedge and fence from the field so that every wild animal and thief could just come in and take what they wanted. God would no longer prune or hoe, but let it become overgrown with thorns and briars. The vineyard would be laid waste. There was no need to care about wild, sour grapes.

Tracy Autler's life changed in a very unexpected way on Thanksgiving Day, 1993. Tracy was a single mother, living in a small apartment in a rough neighborhood, she was doing her best to raise a three-year old while preparing for the birth of her second child, with whom she was, at that point, 8 months pregnant.

Living off of welfare and food stamps, her Thanksgiving dinner would not be the sumptuous feast many other Americans were preparing that week. Hers would be primarily comprised of sliced deli turkey, canned green beans, canned yams and some day-old rolls from the baker down the street. Or at least, that is how she expected to "enjoy" her Thanksgiving dinner.

Staring at the canned food on her shelf, Tracy heard a knock at the door. “Who could that be?” she wondered. She wasn’t expecting any company. No friends, no family would be joining her and her three-year old at her feast. There at the door was a man from a local restaurant, holding what would be a full Thanksgiving meal for her and her child, (plus leftovers!), given to her by an anonymous donor.

Tracy was so surprised; she spent the rest of the day crying happy tears. But more than anything she wanted to know who had given such a thoughtful gift.

Years went by and Tracy still hadn’t figured out who had provided this mysterious Thanksgiving meal. After a period of time, Tracy was able to move out of the apartment. She met a wonderful, kind man and got married. Once her babies were a little older, she began working as a nurse’s aide at a nearby hospital. She was invited to participate in a training program that would eventually lead to becoming a registered nurse – she was the first in her family to do so.

From the stump, new life.

Seven years later, working at the ER in the hospital, Tracy Autler was to discover who had provided that amazing Thanksgiving meal. That day, an elderly woman named Margo appeared at the hospital. It was clear Margo did not have long to live. Margo had lived in the same apartment building as Tracy all those years back, and three days before the end of her life, she had the opportunity to take Tracy’s hands in hers and whisper... “Happy Thanksgiving.”¹

In that moment, Tracy knew who had given her that Thanksgiving dinner. She would never have guessed that Margot—the unassuming little elderly neighbor—was behind that generous gift.

That one gift had a massive impact on Tracy’s life. Moved by the anonymous donor’s generosity, Tracy decided in her heart that she was going to find a way to do generous things for other people too.

The very day she got off assistance, she took a basket of gifts down to the welfare office for anyone to take. The welfare officer was stunned. Can you imagine the look on his face? Who does something like that? And that was just the beginning.

¹ Illustration from “The Gift that Inspired a Lifetime of Giving: Sermon Illustration Tuesday”

Since then, Tracy and her husband have become foster parents and adopted a son. She regularly looks for opportunities to give. She volunteers her Saturday afternoons at the local Humane Society. One of her latest ideas was to leave five-dollar Starbucks gift cards with little notes for her coworkers to find, just to make their day better.

What I appreciate most about Tracy's story is that she doesn't do her giving to be noticed by others. Since that Thanksgiving Day in 1993, she has discovered the joy that comes from giving. Now she's hooked. She doesn't give to make herself look good—she gives because she likes giving.²

Throughout all the Scriptures there is nothing as plain as God's friendship with the lowly. It is the meek who will inherit the earth; those who mourn who shall be comforted; the poor in Spirit who will gain the Kingdom of Heaven. Nothing could show God's love better than the gift of Jesus, God's Son. God's work in Jesus shows the strength of God's arm to scatter the proud in their conceit, to put down the mighty from their thrones, to exalt the lowly, to fill the hungry with good things, to help, heal and save.

The problem then and now does not lie with God but with us. The Israelites should have responded to God's grace and mercy with praise and thanks to God and by living lives of love towards other people. The good grapes God expected would be mercy and love, stewardship of time and talents.

Instead God saw the sour grapes of selfishness, corruption, wickedness. God's will is done in heaven and on earth. The northern kingdom of Israel was defeated by Assyria and taken into bondage. The ten tribes were lost and never heard from again. Judah was defeated by Babylon and taken into exile. The land was despoiled, the temple destroyed, the mighty were brought low. What God spoke through the prophet Isaiah came to pass.

Judge between God and people? It was the question Isaiah asked of his hearers during that harvest festival in the eighth century B.C. It is still our question today. God has done so much for us. Even in our darkest times, when we feel abandoned or alone, we have God's promise that God will never abandon or forsake us. No sin or shortcoming, not even our doubts can separate us from God's love in Jesus Christ. God has done such great things for us. Now we just pray that we will bear good fruit in our lives. Bless us, O Lord. Let your vineyards be fruitful. Amen.

² Brad Forsma describes this story further in his book, "I Like Giving":