

Sunday October 5th

Readings

Isaiah 5:1-7

1Let me sing for my beloved my love-song concerning his vineyard: My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. **2**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; he expected it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes. **3**And now, inhabitants of Jerusalem and people of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard. **4**What more was there to do for my vineyard that I have not done in it? When I expected it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes? **5**And now I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard. I will remove its hedge, and it shall be devoured; I will break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down. **6**I will make it a waste; it shall not be pruned or hoed, and it shall be overgrown with briars and thorns; I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it. **7**For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the people of Judah are his pleasant planting; he expected justice, but saw bloodshed; righteousness, but heard a cry!

Psalm 80:7-15

7Restore us, O God of hosts; let your face shine, that we may be saved. **8**You brought a vine out of Egypt; you drove out the nations and planted it. **9**You cleared the ground for it; it took deep root and filled the land. **10**The mountains were covered with its shade, the mighty cedars with its branches; **11**it sent out its branches to the sea, and its shoots to the River. **12**Why then have you broken down its walls, so that all who pass along the way pluck its fruit? **13**The boar from the forest ravages it, and all that move in the field feed on it. **14**Turn again, O God of hosts; look down from heaven, and see; have regard for this vine, **15**the stock that your right hand planted.

Philippians 3:3-14

3For it is we who are the circumcision, who worship in the Spirit of God and boast in Christ Jesus and have no confidence in the flesh—**4**even though I, too, have reason for confidence in the flesh. If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: **5**circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; **6**as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. **7**Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. **8**More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ **9**and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. **10**I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, **11**if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead. **12**Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. **13**Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what

lies ahead,**14** I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

Matthew 21:33-46

33"Listen to another parable. There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a wine press in it, and built a watchtower. Then he leased it to tenants and went to another country. **34**When the harvest time had come, he sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his produce. **35**But the tenants seized his slaves and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. **36**Again he sent other slaves, more than the first; and they treated them in the same way. **37**Finally he sent his son to them, saying, "They will respect my son." **38**But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, "This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance." **39**So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him. **40**Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?" **41**They said to him, "He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the harvest time." **42**Jesus said to them, "Have you never read in the scriptures: "The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord's doing, and it is amazing in our eyes"? **43**Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom. **44**The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls." **45**When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they realized that he was speaking about them. **46**They wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowds, because they regarded him as a prophet.

Sermon

Grace to you and peace from God our Father,
God's Son our Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit:
Amen.

When we read this portion of Isaiah that we heard today, it's hard to imagine these as words from our good and gracious God. How can the one who forgives sins and heals our deepest hurts talk in such terms of judgment? Isaiah even calls it a love song. A love song? Let me get this straight. You planted this field, and you love it so much, but when the fruit of the field is inadequate, you destroy it. I've never quite heard a love song like this. It sure doesn't sound much like a Bette Midler medley to me, anyway.

Part of the problem is that Isaiah's allegory speaks to some of our deepest fears. What will God do if we're not good enough? On the surface, it seems like Isaiah means to say that God will destroy the disobedient, will uproot the unfruitful. Can this really be? Does God abandon us in our fruitlessness? Or is there something else beneath this declaration that we cannot fully see?

Part of the difficulty in understanding these agrarian parables is that we increasingly live in a highly digital, post-agriculture society. The Bible's penchant for language about vineyards and flocks of sheep, about fishing and farming, all seem incredibly removed from our everyday lives.

Before I lived in Columbia, even before I lived in Durham, I grew up in Wayne County Ohio, an area that boasts more cattle than people. No joke. We brag about all that beef because we're proud of it. This is the country. I saw my first combine and smelled my first honey wagon – that's a manure cart – long before I ever saw city equipment like cranes or street sweepers. This is the kind of area where many people attribute all seasonal allergies attributed to "hay fever," even though no one could tell you why they have hay fever so long before the bloom or after the harvest. And as a young child, I grew up surrounded by cornfields. I felt most at home in our back few acres when surrounded by the deep green, silken-topped stalks reaching for the sky.

Now, imagine my surprise as a little boy, no older than eight, when the local farmer left one of the fields beside us unplanted. Rather than row upon row of straight stalks of delicious starch, this field grew with all sorts of strange plants – some soybeans, a bit of alfalfa, a renegade and even some hay sprouted up. Soon, though, the field quickly became a sea of thistles and dandelions. Weeds. Once a beautiful testament to geometry – ruled lines of straight plants that share the same shape and produce the same fruit, seemingly in the same place on every stalk – now it seemed a wasted space, covered in a hodgepodge of whatever seeds were left there from the last harvest, carried over from the next field, or dropped there by the passerby crows. Almost

incredulous, I asked my dad what in blue blazes
Chester – the farmer who rented thousands of acres
in Wayne County – thought he was doing by
abandoning this field.

But that was when I learned something that all
farmers know: to be fruitful, sometimes fields need to
be left fallow. To have a successful crop, sometimes
we need to let nature run its course. Planting the
same crop in the same place every year draws the
same nutrients out of the soil and so eventually leaves
the land unfit to produce good fruit. Letting other
plants grow, letting animals make nests and leave
their own reminders across the dirt covered grid, all
helps to restore the absent nutrients to the soil and
reestablish an ecological balance that annual

farming takes away. To help the corn grow, the field needed to be turned over and left alone in order for there to be a possibility of bearing good fruit. So this was why Chester had left the field, because he had a plan for its fruitfulness, a design for its restoration.

Listen again to God's intent in the words of Isaiah:

What more was there to do for my vineyard that I have not done in it? When I expected it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes? And now I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard. I will remove its hedge, and it shall be devoured; I will break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down. I will make it a waste; it shall not be pruned or hoed, and it shall be overgrown with briars and thorns; I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it.

To a digital age, an age bent on factory farming and immediate production, this sounds like abandonment, desolation, a sort of scorched earth policy. But to a farmer, who knows what land needs to thrive, this sounds much more like following the ground to restore its fruitfulness. Removing the hedge and the wall let in all sorts of animals to help fertilize the ground. Leaving it unattended allows all sorts of plants to grow to restore a balance, and eventually to rot in the soil so that more nutrients return to the earth. Even removing the rain has a purpose, for in limited spurts, droughts prevent water-based erosion and keep nutrients locked within the land.

God is not abandoning this field. Like Chester, God has a plan for its fruitfulness, a design for its

restoration. But for fields that produce no fruits, or produce only rotten fruit, bad fruit, wild fruit, any fruit not suited for feeding the world – restoration of this field must begin with a reversion to wilderness, not destruction, but redevelopment literally from the ground up. What will God do if we're not good enough? Even though God took an incredible amount of time to plant the vineyard in the first place, to tend it and care for it, God is willing to start all over again in order to ensure the fruit we bear is fruit fit to feed the world.

So what does this mean for us? Sometimes we are this field. Sometimes we are this vineyard that produces rotten, wild fruit. Sometimes we are unfit to feed the world with the Gospel of Jesus because we

are too focused on our selves, too preoccupied with the budget, too judgmental, too violent, too opposed to the radical goodness of God. And when this happens, we too need the kind of restoration that begins with redevelopment.

You all, I think, have been through this process pretty significantly over the past few years.

Sometimes the soil you're in just doesn't have any more nutrients. Sometimes, even when we bear fruit, it is not fit for consumption. And so we need to start over in the hands of God. We need our walls and hedges torn down, we need tilled up and to let new plants grow that might bring new nutrients back in this place, we need dry spells that help the ground to settle, to lie dormant and prepare for the new growth

brought on by fresh rains. This isn't God abandoning us, but rather God committing to us, committing to a new kind of field, a new way of bearing fruit, a new sort of fruitfulness.

Of course, this means that the old plants must give way to new. New leadership and new mission to work inside of God's vision for a world reconciled in Jesus. This means that new boundaries will replace the old hedges and walls. That the old way of doing things simply will not do any more. Because, when God redevelops who we are, this is an act full of grace, but it is also one that necessitates significant loss and significant change. There is still pain in this, because we must let go of the old vineyard. We must let other plants grow in places that once held our

most favorite vines. We must led new animals come through and make homes in this field.

For us, this means a lot of things. I'd imagine for many of us moving around the sanctuary and having chairs replacing pews brings a sense of loss, but perhaps that is part of God's restoration of our vineyard. I'd imagine that considering new worship styles and new outreach ministries brings a sense of anxiety, but perhaps that is part of God's restoration of our vineyard. There is change, not just on the horizon, but in the very present of our life together. As we go forward, as God restores this field of Christ Lutheran, church must change from what we are used to being and instead become who we are meant to be. This change may make it more difficult

to recognize God in our midst, because we've always sat in a pew or always faced the same direction or always did things a certain way.

But this change does not mean God is abandoning us! Last week we talked about how God's vision and our mission must line up, and that is what this restoration is all about. God is committed to God's vision – of bringing all people into the love of Jesus – and so God is now reshaping who we are by giving us new missions to Radford University and to ministries of healing and wholeness. Through these God is intentionally in the process of changing who we are, that we might bear good fruit for the world. Throughout this change, God does not leave us. God will not abandon us. Instead, God is preparing our

field to become a place of fruitfulness to feed the world. And God has promised to be in this field, so whatever changes may come, we know one thing, that below the soil, on Christ the solid rock we will stand. Amen.