

Not Business as Usual

Isaiah 5:1-7

Matthew 21: 33-46

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Isaiah 5: 1-7

Let me sing for my beloved my love-song concerning his vineyard: My beloved 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; he expected it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes. And now, inhabitants of Jerusalem and people of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard. 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. 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!

Matthew 21: 33-46

“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. When the harvest time had come, he sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his produce. But the tenants seized his slaves and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. Again he sent other slaves, more than the first; and they treated them in the same way. Finally he sent his son to them, saying, ‘They will respect my son.’ But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, ‘This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance.’ So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him. Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?” 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.” 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’? 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. The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls.” When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they realized that he was speaking about them. They wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowds, because they regarded him as a prophet.

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Some people wanna fill the world with silly love songs. And what’s wrong with that? ⁱ
Paul McCartney’s lyrical question has us thinking about the many different love songs we know,

and all the good, happy feelings and memories they hold for us. Love songs speak a universal language.

We hear the love in Isaiah's words, 'Let me sing for my beloved my love-song concerning his vineyard,' and we can instantly feel the tenderness, the care, the joy, that Isaiah has for his beloved who planted a lush vineyard, fully expecting that it would produce juicy grapes and sweet wine that would bring delight and goodness after all the time, care, labor and dreams.

But then there is a painful twist to this love song. It is not business as usual, it is not and-they-lived-happily-ever-after. This is a love-gone-wrong song. This is the tragic love song of a broken heart, of a jilted lover who was cheated on. It is the broken heart of the lover who says, "I gave everything for you, and you betrayed me. The trust is gone."

God is the singer and the lover who planted a vineyard that was supposed to produce sweet wine, but all God finds in the vineyard of Jerusalem is the sour and rotten fruit of injustice and violence against the poor and needy.ⁱⁱ

God the vineyard owner trampled it all down in Isaiah's prophetic vision. Jerusalem is crushed and the people are carried into exile. The beautiful vineyard is reduced to a stump.

Isaiah actually described two vineyards – the one God intends and envisions, and the one God gets and sees. There's a tremendous gap between those two vineyards, between what is and what could be. Where do you see that gap today in our life, our church, our community? And what is it asking of us? What would it take for us to close it?

Every gap is a call, an asking, an invitation from God. Every gap waits for us to step into and fill it. We are the ones to step into the gap between what is and what could be, between what God has planted and what God expects, between the world as it is and the world as God sees it.ⁱⁱⁱ

This is what God is calling us—us as Smith Church and us as the capital C Church- to in these changing times when the vineyard we have known is not tended by as many careful and committed workers as it once was, yet the fruit is still abundant.

Isaiah sang a love song about the vineyard owner and the wild, bitter grapes it produced. Jesus told a parable about a vineyard owner and his devious, murderous tenants. Both tell of business that should not be usual for a vineyard, the symbol of God's people, either Israel or the church, who are planted and cared for by God.

The parable began with business-as-usual circumstances in Roman-occupied Palestine. A landowner created a vineyard complete with a fence, a winepress, and a watchtower, setting up a good opportunity and expectations for all. Then he became a long-distance absentee landowner, returning to his own country as was common in the far-flung territories of the Roman Empire. Tenants were in charge of overseeing the productivity of the vineyard and paying their rent to the owner at harvest time, in the form of a share of the produce. So far, so good: business was working as usual. But then everything came horrifically apart as^{iv} the tenants were increasingly and violently greedy with all that had been entrusted to their care. They forgot that they were stewards, caregivers, tenants, not the owner, not the one in charge. The landowner, who is not as

absent as the tenants had thought, proved to be forgiving, but very persistent. He sent servants, then more servants, and finally his own son. In a painful twist, this too was not business as usual.

God is the landowner and the landlord who planted a vineyard that was supposed to produce hardy, vibrant grapes, but all God finds in the vineyard of Palestine was the sour and rotten fruit of greed, complacency and violence against those who served justly.

Isaiah's wild grapes and Jesus' brutal tenants show us how the vineyards can be mismanaged, taken for granted, exploited, corrupted and misused. A broken heart love song and a parable with death instead of life beckon us to see that it cannot be business as usual.

We've all been given vineyards to tend. They are the people, relationships, circumstances and events of our lives that God has entrusted to our care. That might mean our partner or marriage, children and family, our work, our church, our daily decisions and choices, our hopes, dreams, and concerns are the vineyards in which we are to reveal the presence and life of God, to produce the fruits of the kingdom. The vineyards, our work in those vineyards, and the fruit produced come together to show us to be sharers in God's kingdom, in the vineyard which God intends and envisions.

We indeed know what the fruits of the kingdom look like then as God as showed us them all in Jesus Christ, in the cornerstone, in the stone the builders rejected. What do we see? Love, intimacy, mercy and forgiveness, justice, generosity, compassion, presence, wisdom, truth, healing, reconciliation, self-surrender, joy, thanksgiving, peace, obedience, and humility. And not as abstract ideals but as lived realities in the vineyards of our lives.

We can recognize that this is his way of coaxing us and encouraging us into being good and faithful servants – good and loving workers, tenants, in the world, in the vineyards, he has left to our care – good and faithful followers of his son, Jesus. Wooing us to give and pray for the spread of his kingdom and for the wellbeing of his children, our siblings in Christ.^v

In this time of the Church's life when it is truly not business as usual, when we are smaller and are all multi-taskers for our ministries and programs and practices and plans, may we remember that the heart of what Jesus wants to get at is this: God's spirit moves to the people who want to bear fruit. God will find people who want to hear "I am the vine and you are the branches. Abide in me and you will bear much fruit."

Abide in me and you will bear much fruit. Amen.

ⁱ https://www.lyricsfreak.com/p/paul+mccartney/silly+love+songs_20105859.html

ⁱⁱ https://www.stevethomason.net/2015/11/23/sermon-on-isaiah-5_1-7-11_1-5/

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://interruptingthesilence.com/2020/10/04/between-what-is-and-what-could-be-a-sermon-on-isaiah-51-7/>

^{iv} <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise-common-lectionary/ordinary-27/commentary-on-matthew-2133-46-2>

^v <https://interruptingthesilence.com/2014/10/12/hows-your-garden-growing-a-sermon-on-matthew-2133-46/>