

Proper 15 Year C
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St. James, Wheat Ridge

By the Rev. Becky Jones

Got any gardeners here?
Anybody ever plant something that didn't grow the way you'd hoped it would?
You watered it.
You fertilized it.
You kept it free of bugs.
But for all your attention
It just didn't bear fruit the way you hoped it would.

And you know, it's not just literal gardens we're talking about.
Every one of us here knows the anguish of disappointed expectations.
Our worst disappointments –
 The promotion that didn't materialize,
 The romance that didn't work out,
 The parent who didn't show up – again...
These kinds of disappointments can almost ruin us with bitterness.

We've all had the experience
Of having done everything right,
Only to have our efforts bring us nothing in return.

So we all understand the first reading we heard, from Isaiah,
We can relate to that disappointed gardener.

The gardener had done everything possible
To create a good vineyard and grow sweet grapes.
But instead, he gets wild, bitter grapes,
With large seeds and very little fruit.
“What more was there to do?” the gardener asks.
And we all know the answer: nothing.

Then the gardener asks another question: “Why?”
Sooner or later, we all come to that question.

Why did this happen?
 And in this reading, as in life, there's no straight answer.
 Circumstances crush us,
 And we have no explanation.
 We ask why, we look for good reasons,
 But we find none.
 Just like the gardener in Isaiah, who gets no answer.

The thing is, the gardener in Isaiah isn't just any gardener.
 The gardener in Isaiah is God.
 And the vineyard that won't produce good grapes
 Is Israel. God's beloved children. God's chosen people.
 And so what does God the gardener do?
 Does God keep working away at the lousy vineyard?
 Does God start over?
 Does God overlook the wild grapes
 and keep watering the good ones?

Not in this passage, he doesn't.
 In this passage, God gives up.
 In this passage, God decides to walk away,
 To withhold the rain.
 To let the wild grapes do what they will.
 The vineyard is lost,
 And God isn't going to invest any more time in it.

How could this be?
 Don't we sing psalms about a God whose steadfast love endures forever?
 Does God really ever give up?
 Is it possible to reach a point of no return with God?
 And if so, could we already be past that point in our own lives?
 Could God have given up on me?

We turn to today's Gospel for comfort
 But we don't find much comfort THERE.
 We hear Jesus – our loving Savior, the Prince of Peace –
 Telling us HE hasn't come to bring peace.
 No, he comes to bring division!

Jesus, who only recently rebuked James and John

For wanting to bring fire down on unwelcoming Samaritans,
 Now this same Jesus suddenly declares he can't wait
 To bring fire down himself!

What's up with THAT?

What's wrong with Jesus?

Well, theologians have been arguing about this passage
 for a long time.

We have a hard time harmonizing the Jesus in this gospel passage
 With the Jesus we know and love from other gospel passages.

Just like we have a hard time harmonizing the disappointed gardener God in
 Isaiah

With the steadfast God who never gives up that we read about elsewhere.

Maybe the tension between those two different portrayals of Jesus,

Those two different portrayals of God,

Can never be completely resolved,

Nor should they be.

Uncomfortable as it may make us,

These twin images represent God's mercy and God's judgment.

Somehow, only God is able to reconcile the two.

These passages don't seem to offer us much hope,

Particularly the passage from Isaiah.

It seems there is only judgment in them, and sadness.

It's the picture of what happens when a people

refuse the care and nurture lavished on them.

Or when they take the word of God

And turn it into something God never intended,

Something vile and ugly and brutish,

Something that seeks to justify our worst inclinations.

We see that happening all around us today, don't we?

Sometimes, when I look at what our nation has become,

The atrocities we overlook,

The crudeness we accept,

I wonder why God puts up with us at all.

And I think we ARE being devoured.

Like Isaiah's vineyard, we ARE being overgrown

with briars and thorns.

So where is the GOOD news in this?
 We'll need to find it elsewhere,
 Because it's certainly not in these seven verses of Isaiah,
 Or these seven verses in Luke.

But you know, later in the book of Isaiah,
 Later in time,
 The prophet speaks of another vineyard.
 The prophet then sings a happier song
 Of a pleasant vineyard tended by God,
 Blossoming and putting out shoots
 Until the whole world is filled with fruit.

That passage of Isaiah was written after the destruction of Israel,
 After they were carried off into exile in Babylon.
 It's a sort of reversal of what Isaiah Chapter 5 writes.
 It's not a passage composed by a naive optimist.
 It's a song written from the ashes,
 After deliverance from horror.

Judgment does come, and punishment;
 But then there will be good news as well.
 There is hope yet,
 But first, people have to be willing
 To see the horrible things Isaiah sees:
 Things like bloodshed where justice is meant to be.
 And we must hear the terrible things he hears,
 Like cries of pain, instead of righteousness.
 We've got to open our eyes
 And look outside the pleasant little bubble
 That contains our everyday middle class suburban lives
 And see just what pain
 Others have to endure,
 Just so we can continue to live in our bubble.

And that division of which Christ speaks,
 The polarization of our nation
 That we've all grown so weary of,

Perhaps that is simply the result
Of the gospel breaking in among us.
Painful and wearisome as it is,
Perhaps it is Christ at work,
Destroying the old,
Clearing the way for the new.

I can't help but think that there is something valuable,
Something that Christ wants us to experience,
In the relentless arguing over divisions
That seem intractable.
Somehow, being forced to work out deep disagreements,
To live in the tension of holding mutually exclusive positions,
There is something in that is good for us.
It somehow brings about the pruning away
Of all that we only *thought* we needed,
And we begin to recognize, once again,
The one true vine of which we are all a part,
The one true vine that holds us all together.

If we can live through this present discomfort,
And not lose sight of that true vine,
Then we might just be ready
To submit again
To the bruised and aching hands –
To the crucified, nail-pierced hands –
Of the master gardener,
Who still dreams of a beautiful vineyard,
That yields fat, gorgeous fruit
For the whole world.

Amen.