

Isaiah 5:1-7; Psalm 80:7-15;
Philippians 3:4b-14; Matthew 21:33-46

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

It is with great fondness that I remember my first car. It was not given to me in high school (which I try to remind my 14 year old daughter, who seems to expect things when she turns 16), nor did my parents present it to me during my college years. Six months after I began my first job after college, I bought this car myself. It was used (that was all I could afford); I could not afford new car payments in my salary. It was a used Chevrolet Monza (for those of you who do not recognize what that car was, it was the same thing as a Sunbird and a Starfire), but all you really need to know about the car is . . . they were cheap cars! They were cheap. And I loved my car! It was a used Chevrolet Monza in a color similar to our communion wine. It lacked air conditioning; it certainly did not have a sun roof; it had an AM-FM radio, and that was the extent of its options. I sat kind of low in the bucket seats (I know - you're all saying "You always sit kind of low, Nancy!") but I sat unusually low, so I purchased a communion wine colored pillow that I sat on so that I could see over the dashboard. I loved my car! I took great care of it. I regularly waxed the exterior, and I "Armor-All-ed" the interior, and I had a friend install a cassette player and two speakers. My then-boyfriend helped patch up the rust spots that began to appear following a couple of those nasty western Pennsylvania winters. I had the car, not only through my first four years of a job after college, but I had it for my four years of seminary education at Gettysburg. It still waxed it, I still nurtured and cared for it, I still loved it; it showed signs of age, but I kept it going and it did exactly what I wanted it to do.

During my second year at seminary, there was a day while driving around Gettysburg when the car died. It required, basically, an entire new transmission. I know that they put in a new cam shaft (I don't know what that does) and they put in a new crankshaft (and I don't know what that does, either), and they put in a lot of other things that I didn't know what they did. Some people might have said, why don't you just junk it and get a new one, but I loved my car and I had them put in that transmission and it gave me good service. My car did what I wanted it to do and what I expected it to do. I loved my car.

Have you ever had a possession that you dearly loved, like my first car? Have you ever had something that you nurtured and cared for? Something that gave you great pleasure, something that you invested your time and energy and money in, knowing that the results were worth it to you? If you have ever had a possession like that, or if you have one now, you can relate to the owner of the vineyard in our first lesson.

The vineyard owner loves his vineyard; that's obvious by the care he gives it. Why even before he planted the vineyard, he made the land ready for successful planting. He cleared the stones; he chose fertile soil. He did everything he could to make that successful. He set a watchtower in the vineyard to watch out for predators. And then he chose the choicest, most select vines to produce sweet grapes. Investing that kind of energy, investing such attentiveness to this vineyard, was indicative of his love for it. But it also meant that he expected it to yield fruit. He had expectations that surely good and abundant fruit would be forthcoming.

Now if this poem, literally a love song, if this love song is an allegory the way many scholars believe, then the prophet Isaiah is singing a song about our Lord God. He is the owner of the vineyard. This love song is the story of the relationship, the covenant, between the Lord God and Israel; it's a love song about God's love for His people. We have heard this story throughout the Old Testament and here we get this song about it. The Lord God planted a people in His name; He placed them in fertile land and wanted them to take root; He chose them out of His love for them and He gave them this land where they might take root and grow and blossom and flourish. And Israel (or should I call Israel the vineyard?) has been lovingly nurtured by this Lord God all these years. Naturally the Lord God expects good fruit. He expects just and compassionate acts to come from their hands. He expects them to care for the widow and the orphan, the poor and the hungry, the stranger who walks into their land - He expects them to be obedient to Him and to worship Him alone. Now, wasn't it reasonable, wasn't it entirely reasonable that He should have those kinds of expectations, given His investment of His time and His energy and His love?

So here is this love song, but it takes a very strange and jarring turn halfway through our lesson. The vineyard doesn't bear sweet grapes at all; it bears bitter grapes, worthless and inedible. Or to interpret the allegory further, the people of Israel turn from God; they do not follow His righteous ways. Injustice is what reigns in the land. The holy law of God is ignored, and Israel can't possibly be a light to the nations because they are faithless and they are disobedient. On the contrary, they are making a mockery of the relationship and the covenant that God has made with them.

So, this love of the owner for the vineyard, of the Lord God for His people, goes unrequited, and there is nothing quite so heartbreaking as unrequited love. You can hear the sadness, the pathos, in this love song as the vineyard owner, whose expectations have been totally dashed, asks this question: "What more was there to do for my vineyard than I have already done? What more could I have done?" And with this sadness that's tinged with fury, with tears and anger all at once, the vineyard owner dismantles the vineyard. He takes down the hedges and the fences that would protect it, and lets nature take its course; he no longer sustains and nurtures the land. And the conclusion is now clear to anybody who listens to the prophet Isaiah: there are dire consequences for the people of Israel; the vineyard will be laid waste by its enemies and the Lord God, who loved them, will seem strangely absent.

Now our gospel lesson is not a love song, but Jesus' parable opens up the same way; it's as if he uses some of the same words from Isaiah. Jesus reiterates the care of the owner of the vineyard, the care that he gives to the land; he reiterates the expectation that whatever is produced on that land belongs to the vineyard owner; it belongs to him. Only this time the focus is not so much on the land as it is on the laborers, the tenant farmers who have been hired to work the land. The land is producing, but the tenant farmers refuse to give the owner what is his; they flout his authority over them; they claim for themselves the harvest; they kill the slaves he sent to collect the produce, they beat one, they kill another, and they stone the third. You can't hear it in Matthew, you can't read it in Matthew, but you can sense that the very same question is being asked: What more was there to do for my vineyard than I have already done? The vineyard owner does something more; he says, I'll send my son; they'll respect him. I'll send him in. What more could I do then, for my vineyard? So the son was sent in to collect the fruits, and the tenant farmers did not respect his authority and they killed him.

Like Isaiah's listeners, those people who were hearing Jesus tell this parable - particularly the religious authorities, particularly the chief priests and the Pharisees in the temple - they can't help but get it; it is very clear to them what Jesus is talking about. It doesn't mean they're changing, it doesn't mean they'll repent - but they get it. And they get angry. Because the Lord Jesus has rendered this judgment upon them: the Lord God gave them every opportunity and everything they needed to bear good fruit. He gave them everything they needed to care for the people in their charge and to lead those people into faithful living. The Lord God has now come to claim His due, and what is due is a holy nation that is going to give the world a glimpse of this God and what a peaceable kingdom of God might look like. So the Lord God sent His Son Jesus into the vineyard, to His people. Yet the very ones who ought to listen to this authoritative voice ignore Him, and even plan to do away with Him. The tenants of the vineyard fail in their responsibility; they don't live up to it.

What more could I have done for my vineyard than I have already done?

A problem with this parable is that it has been used more than once over the years to promote anti-Semitism, and that is a wrongful and wicked use of this text. What we should see here, though, is a transfer of responsibility; that the responsibility that was given to Israel has now been transferred to the Church. It's not unlike the fact that I traded in my old beloved Chevy Monza for a new car when my Monza no longer did what I needed it to do; when my expectations were no longer met; when I couldn't put in a third transmission, I traded it in. It's not unlike being the second stringer on a football team and the coach tells the second string quarterback when the first string quarterback just isn't able to run with the ball, that he needs him to now run with the ball. And by the way, we're behind 35 to nothing.

Matthew tells the Church that we are the new tenant farmers. To us has been entrusted the vineyard, the production of the fruit, the collection of the harvest; to us has been entrusted the announcing of God's kingdom in our midst; to us has been entrusted the proclaiming of forgiveness for those who sin; to us has been entrusted the living out of God's gracious love for all of creation. This is not a responsibility that we ought to take lightly. It's going to involve our listening to the authoritative voice of our Lord, and it's going to require an investment of our time and money and energy. It involves our asking God to teach us, to show us how to love each other, and then how to love the world; to love the world the way He loves the world so that in the fullness of that love, hatred is overcome and wounds are healed and hearts are made open to receive him. We ought not be haughty that the responsibility has been transferred to us - lucky us, the Church; we ought, instead, to be humble and awestruck that we have been chosen to run with the ball. But . . . we are still not the owners of the vineyard; we're just the tenant farmers, we just work here. All that we are and all that we have - in fact the whole world - is God's. But of this we can be sure: like the vineyard so loved, so nurtured and cared for, the Church will be given everything - everything - it needs in order to produce what God wants.

Amen.