

Sermon – August 14, 2022

Pastor Dan Hollis

Isaiah 5:1-7

Who here has heard or read one of Aesop's fables before? You know, "The Hare and the Tortoise," "The Goose that Laid the Golden Eggs," "The Wolf in Sheep's Clothing," "The Dog and His Reflection," things like that. Sounding familiar? I've loved Aesop's fables since I was a kid. They're very short stories that teach very clear lessons, and they've embedded themselves in cultures across the world since the sixth century BC, when Aesop lived.

You ever heard the phrase "sour grapes?" Well that comes from one of Aesop's fables: "The Fox and the Grapes," which I'll read for you from the version found in the Library of Congress.

A Fox one day spied a beautiful bunch of ripe grapes hanging from a vine trained along the branches of a tree. The grapes seemed ready to burst with juice, and the Fox's mouth watered as he gazed longingly at them. The bunch hung from a high branch, and the Fox had to jump for it. The first time he jumped he missed it by a long way. So he walked off a short distance and took a running leap at it, only to fall short once more. Again and again he tried, but in vain. Now he sat down and looked at the grapes in disgust. "What a fool I am," he said. "Here I am wearing myself out to get a bunch of sour grapes that are not worth gaping for." And off he walked very, very scornfully.

This fable about "sour grapes" helps us recognize that when we fail to accomplish or achieve something, we often try to save face by convincing ourselves it wasn't worth achieving in the first place. "I'm too good for that job anyway; *their* loss," or, "that girl wasn't even that pretty; I don't know why I *bothered* trying to ask her out. Pfft."

Of course, aside from the good-grapes/bad-grapes connection, the fable of "The Fox and the Grapes" doesn't really have a *lot* to do with this morning's Scripture reading from Isaiah. The *fox* in Aesop's fable doesn't represent *God*, it represents *us*; whereas in *Isaiah's* parable, *God* is the *keeper* of the vineyard, and the *vineyard* is us.

**The lesson of *Isaiah's* story is that God worked hard to provide us with everything we need as a people to bear *great* fruit... and we need to recognize when we fall short of that, and learn to do *better*.**

So let's dig into that. The prophet Isaiah is telling a story to God's people about vineyard keeper, who chose just the right place to plant his vineyard, worked meticulously to prepare the land for it, and cared for and nurtured it so that it would produce the best grapes fit for the sweetest wines. And after all that work, the vineyard *instead* grows the

wrong kind of grapes. Sour grapes—*actual* sour grapes (the cliché from Aesop wouldn't show up for at least a hundred more years).

So Isaiah takes on the voice of the vineyard keeper and asks God's people if it makes sense for him to give up on the vineyard. He did everything anyone could possibly do to get good grapes to grow properly, and the vineyard didn't hold up its end of the bargain. Is he within his rights to tear down the walls he built around it and let the wilderness consume it?

And of course, God's people would say, "Yeah. What good is a vineyard that doesn't vin?"

But just then something starts to happen in Isaiah's parable. "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." All of a sudden, God's people realize this isn't your garden variety vineyard keeper Isaiah's talking about. Nobody but *God* can command the very clouds.

So then Isaiah has his own Perry Mason moment, where he turns to the very people who said, "Yeah Mister Isaiah, tear down this vineyard," and he says, "*You're* the vineyard. God provided a perfect world for you, provided all you would ever need to bear good fruit, and nurtured you your whole life long, and just like those grapes, you have fallen short again and again. There was nothing more I could have *done* to prepare the ground for justice and goodness and flourishing life, but just look *around* at what you've grown instead."

And the end of this passage is the kind of thing I *love* about Hebrew Scriptures. In the translation in your pew Bibles, it reads, "[God] expected justice, but saw bloodshed; righteousness, but heard a cry!" What we *miss* by not being able to read ancient Hebrew is the evocative nature of the poetry of this moment. The first two nouns—justice and bloodshed—are *mispat* and *mispah*. And the *second* two nouns—righteousness and cry—are *sedeqa* and *se'aqa*. "He hoped for mispat, but instead mispah; for sedeqa, but instead se'aqa." My Old Testament professor in seminary tried to capture that poetry in his English version of this line: "He hoped for justice, but instead jaundice; for virtue, but instead violence."

In winemaking, the difference between good fruit and bad fruit is just a little bit of sourness. In Hebrew, the difference between justice and a cemetery is the sound of a *consonant*.

In Aesop's fable, the difference between a happy fox and sour grapes is a few inches, and in our lives, it doesn't take a *lot* for humanity to fall short of its potential.

Today's Scripture reading is a reminder that should stand as a wakeup call: in Isaiah, the vineyard had been given fertile ground and every opportunity to produce good fruit, and instead it yielded bad fruit.

**We too—humanity, society, civilization—we were blessed with the perfect *Goldilocks* of all planets, given every opportunity to practice justice and righteousness, but again and again we are found practicing the very opposite, whether to each other, to ourselves, or to the very planet that gave us life.**

"What more was there to do for my vineyard that I have not done it it? When I expected it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes?"

I don't think I'm saying anything particularly radical here. We fall *short* of the potential and promise God placed within us and laid before us.

So what does that mean in the context of our reading today? Are we forsaken, like the vineyard in Isaiah? Is God so disappointed in us that it's time for God to... flip the Monopoly board and go home?

To use words from *later* in Isaiah, "'Comfort, comfort my people,' says your God. 'With gentle words, tender and kind.'" Yeah, humanity can be pretty disappointing. But God's disappointment, just like God's comfort, *comes* from a place of *love*.

The "wrath of God" is always a hard thing to reconcile with the idea of a *loving* God, right? Well I love this quote from Dr. Sinclair Ferguson:

"Strictly speaking, wrath is not an *attribute* of God. It would be more appropriate to say that the wrath of God is the *manifestation* of the *holiness* of God in the context of the *sinfulness* of man. I believe Scripture tells us that God has only *one* unchanging attitude toward humanity. That one attitude is *love*. To know God is to know love. All of his *other* attributes *flow* from *love*."

God doesn't get angry at the injustice in the world because we have a *wrathful* God. God doesn't find our actions disappointing because we have a *scornful* God. When we fall short, God is disappointed in us because of God's bottomless *love* for who we *are* and for the *potential* for *goodness* we have within us.

**The lesson of Isaiah's vineyard is that God has given us *everything* we need to be the best versions of ourselves. As a society, as a species, as a *world*, we are *perfectly* placed to do justice, righteousness, kindness, selflessness, liberation, care, peace, and renewal. God has given us all God has to give and couldn't give no more. We have no *excuse* not to push our nations, our society, and the very human race to bear good fruit. The *best* of fruit.**

**Every act of hate, of oppression, of selfishness, of waste and destruction, it's all bad grapes. And we should be doing better.**

I'll leave you with another of Aesop's fables: "The Peasant and the Apple Tree."

A peasant had an apple tree growing in his garden, which bore no fruit, but merely served to provide a shelter from the heat for the sparrows and grasshoppers which sat and chirped in its branches. Disappointed at its barrenness he determined to cut it down, and went and fetched his ax for the purpose. But when the sparrows and the grasshoppers saw what he was about to do, they begged him to spare it, and said to him, "If you destroy the tree we shall have to seek shelter elsewhere, and you will no longer have our merry chirping to enliven your work in the garden." He, however, refused to listen to them, and set to work with a will to cut through the trunk. A few strokes showed that it was hollow inside and contained a swarm of bees and a large store of honey. Delighted with his find he threw down his ax, saying, "The old tree is worth keeping after all."

We are not forsaken. We are not without hope. We have not fallen so far that there isn't a path ahead. Our story from Isaiah isn't a condemnation—it's a wake-up call.

So let us prove, from this day forward, to the God who planted us in such a fertile world full of promise... that this old tree is worth keepin' after all.

Amen.