

16th Sunday after Pentecost

October 2, 2011

Isaiah 5:1-7 “How Does Your Vineyard Grow?”

I once had a very interesting tour of a vineyard. The grapevines were very well tended, the grapes were superb, the process from grape to wine was impeccable, and the wine is delicious. It was very interesting to learn about the process from vine to wine. You could tell that the winemaker was very proud of his vineyard and the wine that he produced.

Isaiah uses the image of a vineyard to tell about how precious Israel is to God. God planted Israel in the land, and he tended and cared for Israel through its history. However, we learn that God is not happy about this vineyard. Israel was no longer producing the fruit that God expected. In fact, God is so distressed by the distance Israel has placed between itself and God, that God's heart is broken. Today the new Israel is the Christian church; we are God's vineyard. How does your vineyard grow? What will God find us producing when he comes to his vineyard?

When Isaiah writes about God's vineyard, he is, of course, writing about Israel. Israel is God's beloved and chosen nation whom he planted in the Promised Land. It was a land flowing with milk and honey. It was a land with grape vines and leaves. It was a very fertile land. It was a land that God promised to bless for faithful Israel. God first promised this land to Abraham. God took Abraham up to a high place to view the land as far as he could see. All that Abraham could see would one day belong to Abraham and his descendants. God renewed his promise to Isaac and Jacob, and four hundred years later he renewed his promise to Israel through Moses.

God loved Israel, his vineyard, and he brought her out of slavery in Egypt and led her to the Promised Land. There he settled his beloved Israel in the land, and there he blessed the nation he loved and the people who would one day bring forth the Messiah, Jesus Christ, our Lord. God fulfilled the promise he made to Israel when they finally conquered the inhabitants of the land and took it as its own.

Of course, God loved his whole creation when he carefully formed the earth and solar system, when he created the waters, when he separated them and formed land, when he planted grapevines and the other plants of the earth, when he created living beings to roam the earth, and when he breathed the breath of life into man and woman. God carefully put together everything in his creation so that every part worked perfectly together with every other part of his creation. God looked at all he made and it was very good. So imagine God's sorrow when Adam and Eve disobeyed God's creation and no longer produced the good fruit that God expected.

Likewise, God carefully selected Abraham from all people of his time to become a great nation through his descendants. God carefully cared for Abraham, for Isaac, and then Jacob and his children. God gave Jacob the name Israel, and his twelve sons became the twelve tribes of Israel. Each of the twelve tribes divided and grew as more descendants were added to their number. By the time Israel settled in the Promised Land, they numbered over 1 million people.

God taught Israel how to serve him when he spoke through Moses, who wrote down God's Word. God taught Israel to turn away from idols and to worship him alone. He taught them the proper way to use his name and he gave instructions on how to worship God. He explained about the amount of offerings to bring, the festivals to observe, and procedures as to offering sacrifices. God rescued his beloved Israel from slavery in Egypt, settled them in the Promised Land, and expected them to bear fruit for him, and for a while they did.

However, Israel did not always worship God with an undivided heart. Israel began to adopt the idols of the nations around them, and they sacrificed to them. The fruit they bore for God was not pure and undivided worship, but it was wild and reckless. And while God had once shown Israel how to provide for the welfare of the priests, the widows, and the orphans, Israel in the time of Isaiah did not always love its neighbor as itself. The nation refused to repent of its sins and turn back to God.

When Israel turned from God, it broke God's heart. When people today turn away from God, it breaks God's heart. Israel's rejection of God reflects the broken relationship God had with Adam and Eve after their disobedience of God's commandment. Even then, God had not finished caring for his creation. God planned for a deliverer to come who would destroy our enemy the devil, bring to us forgiveness of sins, and reconcile us to God. God planned for our restoration through the Messiah who would one day enter our world as Savior. God accomplished this when he sent his own Son to become the Savior of the world. Israel had this promise of God, but Israel rejected God's promise. This broke God's heart.

We are no better than Israel. We are sinners, just as they. We enter this world in a sinful condition and cannot save ourselves. However, because of God's love for us and his creation, God sent his Son into the world to take our sins at the cross and he took the punishment we deserve for our sins. He died for our sins, and he rose again from the dead, and he ascended to the right hand of God because his work as our Savior was complete. Therefore, because of God's love for us in Christ, we are to produce the fruit of a life redeemed in Christ that includes the desire to live for God and follow his commandments. Even then, there are some who have tasted of this salvation and who instead produce wild grapes.

Israel was producing wild grapes. God had warned Israel that if they rejected him and followed other gods, then he would bring judgment on them. In the time of Elijah, God judged Israel by bringing drought on the land for seven years. There was no rain for seven years, and still Israel did not repent and turn back to God. In the time of Isaiah, the northern kingdom was about to go into exile because of their disobedience, and this would finally occur in 722 BC. There was also trouble in the southern kingdom of Israel, the people to whom Isaiah was writing. Not all the kings and priests always remained faithful to God, and they were in danger of receiving the same judgment as the northern kingdom.

God's judgment extends to the entire created world because of sin. God did once judge the earth when he sent a flood of water over the earth and rescued just Noah and his family on the ark. All human life was destroyed because God was not happy with the corruption of humanity in Noah's time. Only Noah and his family were kept safe on the ark with the animals. Just as God judged the creation at that time, God will one more time bring judgment on the entire earth. This will occur when Christ returns and takes the believers in Christ to heaven, but sends the unbelievers to the place appointed for them.

Isaiah writes that the vineyard is the house of Israel, but today the Christian Church is the new Israel, a planting of the Lord through the crucified and risen Lord Jesus Christ. How does your vineyard grow? What will Christ find when returns to take the righteous ones to himself? God is looking for justice and righteousness. On the one hand, we are declared righteous and just because of the righteousness that comes to us from God through faith in Jesus Christ's death at the cross and resurrection from the dead. We take our stand on Jesus Christ. Just as Paul writes in Philippians, everything else that we could hold up to God as a reason to gain heaven and eternal life are just rubbish. We can only be confident before God in the Lord Jesus Christ, our Savior.

There is another kind of justice and righteousness that pleases God. While certainly it is only faith in Jesus Christ that saves, this faith produces in the Christian and the Christian Church a behavior and attitude that reflects that of God's. We are to produce the fruit that God intends for Christians. We are to love God above all things through Jesus Christ, and we are to produce good fruit in our lives for God.

This means that we are to call upon God in prayer, take time to worship God in church and study his Word, honor and respect our parents and others in authority, respect the lives and property of others, live in sexual purity, avoid gossip, speak well of others, and share the good news of Jesus and his sacrifice with everyone who still needs to know and turn to Christ. We are to look out for the needs of others.

God's love for his creation has never wavered. Even when we were sinners, God sent his Son Jesus to die for our sin at the cross. Through Jesus' death and resurrection, we have become God's new vineyard. God continues to care for and tend his vineyard with his holy Word and Sacraments. We produce good fruit for God when we love and seek God through Jesus Christ with our whole heart and when we care for one another in this life with the love of Christ.

soli deo gloria