

About Vineyards and Fig Trees

(Sermon by Rev. John Dieterly, August 15, 2010)

Isaiah 5:1-7 - ¹Let me sing for my beloved, my love-song concerning his vineyard:

My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill.

² 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.

³ And now, inhabitants of Jerusalem and people of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard.

⁴ 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?

⁵ 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.

⁶ 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.

⁷ 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!

Luke 13:6-9 (TEV) ⁶Then Jesus told them this parable: “There was once a man who had a fig tree growing in his vineyard. He went looking for figs on it but found none. ⁷So he said to his gardener, ‘Look, for three years I have been coming here looking for figs on this fig tree, and I haven’t found any. Cut it down! Why should it go on using up the soil?’ ⁸But the gardener answered, ‘Leave it alone, sir, just one more year; I will dig around it and put in some fertilizer. ⁹Then if the tree bears figs next year, so much the better; if not, then you can have it cut down.’”

Some of those Old Testament Prophets must have been awesome preachers. I feel that Isaiah must have been one of the best. He use wonderful imagery, including the powerful image of the suffering servant, which in fact was the foreshadowing of Jesus Christ and his life of suffering. But in today’s lesson he is more like a traveling minstrel, telling his proverb in the form of a song. “Let me sing you a song, a love song, a song about nature, about a beautiful garden.” This is not a typical way to start a sermon – especially not the way we would expect an Old Testament prophet to begin. You can get the impression that those prophets were more of the “hellfire and brimstone” type.

But the lesson this morning, the song he sings, is almost like a cross between a 1960’s ballad and a country western song. You know, the back to nature bit, images from mother earth coupled with the heartbroken lover. I could almost picture someone like Joan Baez starting this song: My love, oh my love, on the hills, the fertile hills, planted a vineyard, a beautiful vineyard, with a peaceful cottage and wine press. But then the song turns to old country-western: But the vineyard was unfaithful. It did not love me in return, but brought me tears and heartbreak – and sour grapes. And then the song picks up again and takes on a stronger beat: The beloved asks – what more could I have done? Those listening to the song would shake their heads sadly – nothing, nothing. You have given all you could. And then the beloved strikes back: I will not prune or hoe, I will break down the wall and the hedge and let it become a wasteland. The listeners, sadly, would agree that the singer’s beloved is justified in his action. Disappointment and rejection are rightly met with reprisal and revenge. But the next line brings added depth to Isaiah’s song. My beloved will also command the clouds that they should not rain on the vineyard. This reveals the identity of the beloved. It is not just a pretty country ballad, because with this line, Isaiah reveals that the beloved is the Lord, and the vineyard is Israel, God’s beloved people. He goes on to be even more explicit: God’s own people are the ones who have yielded sour grapes instead of good grapes, bloodshed instead of justice, crying instead of righteousness.

Now we might respond that we are not necessarily the guilty ones in this song. We don’t actively engage in oppression or persecution. Most of us try not to walk around producing sour grapes. Oh, sometimes we might slip, but we come to confession, and trusting in Christ, we pray for forgiveness. And yet, are we just as guilty?

Jesus brings the same message when he talks about the fig tree. Not only does God **not** want us to yield sour grapes, but we will be cut down if we do not yield good fruit. This is something that should make many of us

begin to feel uncomfortable because I am sure that every one of us has had times when we have not responded in a Christ-like manner, when we have walked away from a person in need or not taken the time to show compassion. Why do we do it? Maybe we are afraid. Maybe we have been burnt when we have tried to help someone. Maybe we can compare our reluctance to help others to our experience with hitch-hiking. How many of you hitch-hiked in years past? It was almost a common way to get around. I can't tell you how often I hitch-hiked across Pennsylvania when I was in college, but not today. We hear too many stories about violence, and so I wouldn't want to hitch-hike, for fear of who might pick me up, and I am afraid to pick anyone up. And so I keep on driving, and keep the doors locked, and bear no fruit.

Hitch-hiking is just one area where we are afraid to help others. Have you ever helped another person and been burned? This happens a lot at churches. I am amazed at how many people there are who just "work the system." In the few years I have been here I have had a number of people come to Peace Church and ask for assistance. Most of the time I send them on to Greensboro Urban Ministry, or more recently, I have posted the name and need on the GCAN website, GCAN standing for Guilford Congregational Assistance Network. This is such a helpful network for finding assistance for people who are really in need. But I can't tell you how many times I get a response that assistance has been given, or the need is not genuine.

Several years ago the consistory took a very supportive action deciding that if I was approached by a person needing assistance, and if I felt the need was genuine, and not too great, I could use my discretion and give some help. I have done that on a number of occasions. Just two weeks ago a man came and his need wasn't that great, but he seemed genuine, and the need was urgent. And he promised he would be back that afternoon to repay me. Not only has he not come back yet to repay me, but there has been no word of thanks. And in fact, I began to reflect on those that I have helped, and only once, only one time since I have been here, did I get a note of thanks. I am sure that many of you can tell of similar experiences. And so we become very cautious. We are not too quick to help. Almost like refusing to pick up hitch-hikers, we sit in our churches, keep our hands on the wheel, and keep on going and we don't yield any fruit.

Do you do the same thing at home? Do you remember stories from years ago, how a vagabond might knock on grandma's door, and grandma would cook a meal, or sometimes even take him in? What are we doing now? How are we helping those who are hungry, who are homeless? Or do we think it is OK because we have Greensboro Urban Ministry and Salvation Army. Let them take care of it. Let me alone in my house, don't disturb me. We need to be careful so that we do not become callused or try to justify ourselves in doing nothing. Don't let those who would take advantage of you reduce you to being without fruit. Be discerning – not everyone who asks for help has a legitimate need, unfortunately. But don't become calloused – continue to listen, and take a chance from time to time, and give some help, bear some good fruit. You are God's beloved vineyard. God loves you with a tender love, a forgiving love. Respond to his love and care by giving good fruit. Love one another, love those who need your help.

There is another lesson in the parable of the fig tree. If you want to think of it as an analogy – who is the owner of the vineyard where the fig tree is planted? There is a pretty obvious answer: God is the one who expects good fruit from his vineyard. Then who is the fig tree? The easy answer is that we are – we are the ones who should yield fruit. But then who is the gardener? Who is the one who tenderly cares for the barren fig tree, with the hope that next year it will bear fruit? Some might say it is Jesus, but if we follow Jesus, then **we are the ones challenged to care for the fig tree**. It is our task to nurture those who are not bearing fruit, because all people are trees in God's vineyard. God wants all people to yield good fruit. It is our challenge to not only help those in need, but to help others bear good fruit. Or as one writer put it, God didn't call you into His vineyard to eat grapes but to get busy and do some hoeing.

So today I have two challenges for you. Bear good fruit. Help those who are in need, share your resources, lend a helping hand and a listening ear. You need to be perceptive, discerning those with a genuine need and those who are trying you out. But don't become calloused – there are some legitimate needs, and we need to help if we can.

And second, work with those who are unable to bear fruit. Encourage those who may have become calloused and discouraged by the con artists. Nurture them, encourage them, strengthen them, until all of God's vineyard becomes productive.