

SERMON TITLE: "The Vineyard Of The Lord"

TEXT: Isaiah 5:1-7

PREACHED AT: Neighbourhood Church

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Today we are at Church Camp. This is our third annual camp and each year we keep building and refining what we are doing. The camp theme that we began with was that of an old fashioned family gathering in which people come from far and wide to spend time together as a clan. When our kids were little we read through all the Little House On The Prairie books and the stories of people coming from miles around for annual picnics are still vividly in my mind. What great imagery. Once a year the scattered families would share food and stories. The old people would sit and watch while the children played games.

As they gathered they would connect as a community.

I hope that our church camp continues to grow into that kind of an event- a place of building roots and connecting the old and the new.

In our sermon series we are going through Isaiah and early in the process of thinking about church camp and Isaiah themes, one immediately came to mind- a theme that is all about the business of connecting as a community. It is an image that Isaiah uses a great deal and again the imagery he marks out becomes used in the rest of the Bible and Jesus then uses it to illustrate what His message and purpose is.

Isaiah 5:1-7 The Song of the Vineyard

I will sing for the one I love a song about his vineyard: My loved one had a vineyard on a fertile hillside. He dug it up and cleared it of stones and planted it with the choicest vines. He built a watchtower in it and cut out a winepress as well . . . 5:1-2 The vineyard of the LORD Almighty is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah are the garden of his delight. Isaiah 5:7

And the picture is clear-

The Family Of God Is His Vineyard

This is an image introduced by Isaiah that then becomes part of the imagery of the Scriptures. The vineyard as a place is part of the earliest parts of the Bible. The first thing that Noah does, after the flood on landing in a habitable land, is plant a vineyard. From that time on the vineyard was part of life in Biblical lands. I wonder if, in a land of scarcity of fresh water the vineyard didn't come to symbolize life itself. Vineyards filled the countryside and seem to be the symbol of prosperity for a community. Whenever the countryside is described it is the pictures of vineyards that dominate the scene.

Several years back our family did a trip to Europe and lived for a couple of weeks in ancient settings- once in a vineyard and once in an olive grove.

It was a very comforting and serene feeling to have a home surrounded by these beautiful green plants.

When Isaiah compares God to a farmer looking over his fields with pride- it is something that we can easily understand. There across the rolling hills are rows and rows of vines.

When Isaiah compared the family of God to a vineyard- they knew the picture

well. We can easily get it as well.

But Isaiah has a tough message to bring-

Then he looked for a crop of good grapes, but it yielded only bad fruit. Isaiah 5:2b

When we lived in those vineyards and olive groves we just simply enjoyed the ambience. It was beautiful and exotic and felt like we were living in a postcard. Fruit or no fruit- it meant nothing to us. In fact I don't even remember if there were olives in the olive grove or not. It didn't matter.

But those who planted those vineyards and olive groves did not go to all that work to create a beautiful scene- they were looking for a crop.

And what is God expecting from His family-

This Family Is Supposed To Bear Good Fruit

And this is where the problem lies- the vineyard is not producing good fruit. As a person who grew up on a farm I can easily imagine a field without fruit. We have a cheery tree on our bank that blooms beautifully every year. Occasionally a few green cherries actually form- but I don't believe I have every seen a ripe cherry on that tree. As a cherry tree it is entirely useless- very pretty but useless.

But that is not the only problem. In the case of this vineyard- fruit was being produced- but it was actually bad. How does that happen? In the natural world it happens when the wrong plant is planted.

When we were growing up our favorite fruit tree was the cherry tree. It was sparse in its delivery of fruit but when we managed to actually get a ripe cherry- that was a prize. I dreamed of a cherry orchard [to this day- this is one type of fruit that I will overeat :)]. With that in mind I remember going for a trip to Manitoba and sure enough on the farm we were staying at there was a cherry tree- full of beautiful looking cherries. I still remember wondering why no one had picked them. So I climber the tree, picked a cherry and then I knew- they were choke cherries. You couldn't eat them. They were bad fruit.

The metaphor of the vine, is of course a metaphor. In nature- if you plant a good vine- it will bear good fruit. One of the purposes of this metaphor is to remind us- as God's people that bearing bad fruit is something that just shouldn't happen.

God planted a good vine- that vine is capable of bearing good fruit. When bad fruit emerges- it is a result choices that we make- that are actually going against that part of our nature.

We are supposed to be shocked that a good vine even could produce bad fruit.

And yet it does. The reality of bad fruit growing out of this vine is unequivocal. When I popped the first choke cherry into my mouth I thought that it have been an anomaly- so I took another one. Quickly I realized that this was bad fruit.

As human beings there is really a place where we stop trying to duck the harsh reality- we consistently produce bad fruit.

The question of why bad fruit is not asked at this point but what is clear is- something has to be done about that. Trees producing bad fruit are no use.

And so Isaiah asks a rhetorical question-

Now you dwellers in Jerusalem and men of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard. What more could have been done for my vineyard than I have done for it? When I looked for good grapes, why did it yield only bad? Isaiah 5:3-4

In other words what am I supposed to do with this?

The answer is self-evident- once everything that can be done- has been done there is only one thing left. Isaiah describes what everyone knew had to happen next.

Now I will tell you what I am going to do to my vineyard: I will take away its hedge, and it will be destroyed; I will break down its wall, and it will be trampled. I will make it a wasteland, neither pruned nor cultivated, and briers and thorns will grow there. I will command the clouds not to rain on it." Isaiah 5:5-6

The vineyard will be abandoned and the land that was once gardenized will revert back to its original state. In the forest around BC there are numerous abandoned farms and many of them had orchards. It is amazing how quickly the natural landscape takes over again and reverts back to forest. Trees last longer than gardens and the vines are somewhere between.

Isaiah describes the process. First the walls are removed, then pruning stops, weeding stops, watering stops, the weeds grow and what was once a beautiful garden becomes scrub brush.

It is a sad picture.

Isaiah, however is not a book of doom and gloom even with this terrible diagnosis. As we noted last week, while Isaiah is alive- the outward sign of things actually was not all that bad. Life was going on- there was prosperity- the vineyard still looked lush and beautiful.

Isaiah writes before the full calamity falls but even with this very long road of downward progression before them- Isaiah already writes of a hope that he holds before the people-

The vineyard of the LORD Almighty is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah are the garden of his delight. And he looked for justice, but saw bloodshed; for righteousness, but heard cries of distress. Isaiah 5:7

The vineyard of the Lord IS His delight even when all He sees is bad fruit.

As Isaiah continues this hope, in the face of on going disaster, actually grows. He writes this oracle-

In that day- "Sing about a fruitful vineyard: I, the LORD, watch over it; I water it continually. I guard it day and night so that no one may harm it. I am not angry. If only there were briers and thorns confronting me! I would march against them in battle; I would set them all on fire. Isaiah 27:1-3

Here God explains His love, His continuing commitment and the source of His exasperation. How like a parent with a child begging a wayward child to the right way. "If there is something that I could do- I would do it." If there were an tangible enemy to attack- I would attack them with all the resources at my disposal.

But that is not the problem- there is no outward enemy- there is an invisible battle of the heart.

Or else let them come to me for refuge; let them make peace with me, yes, let them make peace with me. Isaiah 27:4

That is God's hope- a turning back of His people.

That, in Isaiah's oracle is the distant hope and through the book when he writes of that hope he is the most eloquent.

In days to come Jacob will take root, Israel will bud and blossom and fill all the world with fruit. Isaiah 27:5

The picture of the vineyard that Isaiah present becomes the picture of Israel from that time onward. God is going to restore His prized vineyard!

600 years later when Jesus came with the Good News of the Kingdom of God the language of the vineyard filled His parables. Of all of His parable the one that grabbed Isaiah metaphor most directly, however, was the story of the vine and the branches- **I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. Remain in me, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. John 15:1-5**

I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener . . . I am the vine; you are the branches If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. John 15:5

And what does Jesus want us to get from this?

#1. God's Family Is Still The Vineyard

That is very clear. In fact from the rest of Jesus parables we conclude that this is now to be the renewed vineyard that Isaiah foretold.

In case you missed it- that means we are the vineyard of God. We are the object of His hope and pride. We are that beautiful place on which He showers His affection like the gardener walking around his garden.

But-

#2. The Vineyard Needs To Produce Fruit

A healthy vineyard is a beautiful thing but the purpose of a vineyard is not its beauty- it is its fruit.

We are not just a beautiful object of God's affection, we are here for a purpose. The reason for our existence is to produce fruit. Life is not merely about a state of being- it is purpose driven- to quote Rick Warren.

And-

#3. God's Work Of Tending The Vineyard Is Underway

Vineyards are not "natural", they require husbandry to produce fruit. God is working the vineyard. The garden that is not being worked is abandoned.

But Jesus is also clear that being worked is seldom fun. We are probably one of the first cultures that has recognized the value of exercise. This is surely because we have the option of never really getting up and walking.

Those who exercise come to appreciate the pain the is associated with the use of one's muscles and can learn to actually enjoy it- but the pain that comes from really working is not enjoyable. Being pruned is a miserable process.

But without pruning the vine goes wild producing nothing but branches and leaves. Pruning directs the vine to produce fruit.

And Jesus reminds His family- "don't let this process discourage you- it is necessary for fruit to be produced."

If you have a sense that God is working you over- don't despair. You don't have

to enjoy it but it is useful.

To these OT applications of Isaiah's metaphor, Jesus adds a new piece-

Jesus Is The Stalk Of This New Vineyard

This is a very important added piece. In the old vineyard God had taken the "choices" of vines and planted it. In this vineyard the main plant is the "stalk" of His very own Son.

In Isaiah's vineyard God said that He had planted it with "**the choicest vines.**" Good stalks had been planted but for whatever reason the branches that grew out of that vine had produced bad fruit.

This time the "good vine" is unambiguously good. It is Jesus Himself. This is a vine that will only produce good fruit. This is a stalk that grows out of the goodness of God Himself. Something did go wrong with the previous stalk. This stalk is perfect.

From this new piece to the picture of the vineyard He now adds a couple of pieces.

#1. We Are Shoots Off The Main Vine

This is a very important point that Jesus makes to His followers. As human beings we have 2 identities. The first identity is the identity of humanity. God created us as living beings but that identity was damaged and somehow even the "choicest" selections from that identity fail to produce the good fruit that God expects.

Jesus comes and brings with Him the ability to tap into a new stalk with a new identity- not merely the "choicest" but actually perfect.

As we move forward the challenge we face is to live our lives is to remember which part of our identity we must live out of.

Those who chose to make Jesus Master of their lives are branches are told in no uncertain terms that this identity is where they are to live

Anyone looking around themselves will quickly figure out that this new reality has not resulted in automatically producing fruit the way we should.

So Jesus addresses a question that Isaiah asked but never answered- Why is the fruit not there?

When I looked for good grapes, why did it yield only bad? Isaiah 5:4

That is THE question and now Jesus answers it and directs us. A vine growing from this branch cannot help but producing good fruit- the challenge we face is- staying connected.

#2. Our "Job" Is Staying Connected

A branch that disconnects from the main stalk cannot bear fruit. A branch that remains connected and stays healthy will produce its fruit in its seasons.

Our job is staying hooked up.

It sounds so simple- and at one level it is- but the inclination to disconnect is a big life reality. This challenge is dealt with in other places in the Bible and the answer is the same. Stay hooked up.

This is where there is a direct link back to what we are doing here at Church Camp. This is a "family gathering" of this church family.

There are a lot of different activities going on here but all of them are part of being connected to each other. Some are intentional, some just happen. This is just the

way it works on any healthy organism- connection just happens.

When God called His people together, He called individuals but then He placed them in families.

Why is this important? Because in this organism- when you are connected to the family- it is also part of being connected to the main stalk.