

Tending a Vineyard
Isaiah 5: 1-7; October 8, 2017; Union Congregational United Church of Christ
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Following the events of 911, author, environmentalist, Barbara Kingsolver was asked to write an essay responding to the horrific tragedy. What she wrote became not one but a series of essays – finally gathered into a book titled *Small Wonder*. Not one of the essays Kingsolver included specifically addressed terrorism or border control or national security. Rather these are stories about raising chickens and planting gardens. In the wake of yet another tragedy - another mass shooting – just needing to say ‘another’ – along with all the accompanying media coverage and speculation – I have found myself empty of meaningful words to specifically respond to the latest natural or human made horror. And so, following in the footsteps of Barbara Kingsolver – I find myself writing about planting gardens and tending a vineyard.

Planting a garden – or a vineyard – begins long before a seed or a vine is placed in the ground. The grower must first determine what the crop is they intend to grow, determine the appropriate place to plant that crop, and then determine appropriate seeds or plant material to plant. And depending on the desired crop, this might be a several year project. This is true for anyone interested in planting a vineyard.

Perhaps if you want to plant a tomato or some petunias, you might simply purchase a bag of balanced nutrient soil mixture at your local farm and garden supply store, dump it into a fairly large pot or raised bed planter, and plant the seeds or plants purchased at that same farm and garden supply store.

However, a vineyard is a bit more of a long term investment in terms of time and preparation. A vineyard is a life-time investment – or to be more accurate – a many life-times investment. Some of the oldest wineries in the world produce grapes on vines hundreds of years old.

This summer, I’ve spent quite a few hours volunteering at a local vineyard , increasing my knowledge about planting, pruning, maintaining and harvesting cold-climate grapes. I’m interested in adding to my knowledge as I have a small one acre vineyard planted several years ago on my small farm which is badly neglected with the farm’s current renters.

However, almost any vineyard keeper knows, once grape vines become established, it is nearly impossible to kill those vines, no matter how neglected they may be.

Our text today from the prophet Isaiah speaks to the kind of great love anyone with a passion for growing and the well-being of growing things. Isaiah speaks of a God singing a sad love-song for a vineyard that has lost the ability to produce good sweet grapes. The vineyard so carefully planted with only the best varieties, tended so carefully at the beginning – and now – something has gone terribly wrong – and though the vineyard still looks beautiful – it is sick from the inside – only producing small, sour, wild-like grapes.

For Isaiah – this vineyard – beautiful but rotten inside - makes him so angry – he is furious - calling on God to destroy it - to tear down the walls of protection, and allow the wild creatures in to root it up and tear it down.

Isaiah is angry on God's behalf – using vineyard imagery to speak about God's deep, deep sadness – God's lamenting of beloved Israel, turned so far away from the sweetness of living and acting as God's people – so that now that the only harvest that comes from them is small and sour – a bad taste.

This is so opposite from what God longs to see. What God wants is an abundant and tasty harvest – a harvest of justice and peace – a harvest of righteousness – a harvest of right relationship. Not sour grapes.

And yet – this same lamenting God – knows – even if Isaiah doesn't - that even this ravaged, unprotected, neglected, vineyard – still – still - has the potential to be saved – to be turned around – to bear good fruit once again.

Almost any gardener or farmer knows – when hail, or flood, or drought, or insect or disease ravage a year's crops – it is devastating – and yet –there is always another chance – another year – to grow good crops producing a good harvest.

I own a vineyard – or perhaps better said – a vineyard owns me - a neglected vineyard at that – and I am almost embarrassingly aware that it is a vineyard that in spite of my neglect – of another's neglect – refuses to give up. Every year it sends forth new shoots from strong hardy roots – roots that suffering neglect and abuse even – are unwilling to give up. These new shoots sent up each year – are ready to try again – to receive rain and sun and careful tending – that they might meet their potential – to produce wonderful grapes. Every year they do this – even when every year – they may be mowed off – or grazed off – each year receiving almost none of what they really need

Many years after the prophet Isaiah – Jesus, recalling these biblical vineyard stories that he must have learned as a young child, reminded the ones following him (from the Message), “I am the vine – you are the branches – when you are joined to me, and I with you, the relationship intimate and organic – the harvest is sure to be abundant .” I'm not sure exactly what practical knowledge Jesus had keeping a vineyard – but I do know that Jesus knew a lot about God. And Jesus knew that God's new covenant – the promise God made with God's people in sending them Jesus - is a promise of love – a promise of relationship – a promise of saving humanity from our worst selves – a promise to give us what we need to grow back from the neglected, untended vineyards we've become – to keep us connected and reconnect us – that we might produce abundantly once again.

There are preachers that teach that God will do everything possible to guarantee the prosperity and well- being of humans. They say God wants us to be rich, successful, and above all happy. This is sometimes called the prosperity gospel. This is not what Isaiah says.

Isaiah reminds us that God's love, care and protection come with an expectation: an expectation of doing justice and living in right relationship. These are the fruits God wants to see flourish in us.

The blessings and nurture we receive are meant to result not in selfish accumulation and rich harvests to be stored up for ourselves - but in just social relationships. Justice and righteousness are not something we are to practice for what they will return back to us - they are the main thing. God is not content until all the blessings God gives and we receive are shared fairly with all – all people – and all this created world.

God is always ready to do God's part – weeping with and for us when we do terrible damage to ourselves and others, seeking us over and over when we get lost, loving us unconditionally and dispensing blessing extravagantly. An abundant harvest and willing workers is always the desire of God.