

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod

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Sermon by Pastor Jon D. Buchholz

Great expectations for the Lord's vineyard

—Isaiah 5:1-7

The words of Holy Scripture are a love story, a story of love of infinite proportions. It's the account of God's love for his creation, for his people, for the whole human race. Because God's love is so all-encompassing and includes so many different facets, and because God wants us to understand beyond any doubt how much he loves us, God in Holy Scripture uses different pictures to describe his love for us. A very common picture is the love between a husband and a wife, a bridegroom and a bride, a love that includes joy, delight, ecstasy, companionship, righteous jealousy, tenderness, giving, kindness. We see that description of God's love and relationship with his people pictured many times in Scripture. Another well-known picture is that of a shepherd and his sheep. The Lord is my Shepherd. The shepherd nurtures, feeds, defends, protects, cares for his sheep because he loves us. We are the people of his pasture, the sheep of his hand. In Scripture God is called our loving heavenly Father. In his love he provides for us, protects us, gives us shelter, clothing, a warm welcome home. "As a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him" (Psalm 103:13). Bridegroom, shepherd, father—these are just a few of the many pictures God uses to impress upon us how much he loves us.

Today we have another picture of God's love. It's the picture of the owner of a vineyard and the vineyard he plants and tends. God is the owner, the vineyard his people. It's another picture of love perhaps not so well known as some of the other pictures in the Bible, but it's a powerful picture nonetheless, especially for the people in Isaiah's day who lived in the land of Israel. Many owned and tended vineyards. A vineyard is a labor-intensive enterprise. You have to prepare the soil. In the land of Israel you have to dig out the stones and turn a rocky hillside into a place where something can grow. Then you take those stones you dug up and you build them into a wall around your field, so the critters won't come and eat your plants, and the plants won't get trampled by livestock. Then you plant the grape vines. You water them, dress them, shape them, prune them carefully. You do it with great care and pride, with great attention to detail. You wait for them to grow and mature. You do everything possible to ensure the best possible fruit. It's a lot of work! But for one who tends the vineyard it's a labor of love.

The vineyard of the LORD Almighty is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah are the garden of his delight (v. 7a). Think of what God did for his Old Testament people Israel! He rescued them from slavery in Egypt, delivered them from the house of bondage, where they labored making bricks under the blistering Egyptian sun. He said to Israel, "If you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all the nations you will be my treasured possession" (Exodus 19:5). God delivered his people to the Promised Land, a land flowing with milk and honey, a place of joy and freedom. He built a wall around his people with his holy laws given to Moses on Mt. Sinai. Those laws were given to protect God's people from the invasion of filth and corruption that was all around them, to keep them from being hurt by sin. And grace upon grace, God promised that the very Savior of the world would come from Israel, from the tribe of Judah, to remove forever the curse of sin, to bring forgiveness of sins, perfect reconciliation with God, to remove the shroud of death itself that hangs over all nations, and bring the gift of eternal life. This was God's plan for his vineyard, this little nation of Israel. Think of the grace, the love, the care and protection, all the blessings that God showered down on his people freely and abundantly! Why? Because he loved them, wanted the very best for them, wanted to wrap them up his arms, enfold them in his embrace.

God's desire was that his people respond with gratitude. Isn't that reasonable, that God's people would overflow with thanks to their Creator and Savior God? Isn't it right for God to expect good fruit from his vineyard, an abundant harvest of righteousness, his people overflowing with worship and praise for God and brimming with deeds of love and kindness toward their neighbor? But it was not so. *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* (v. 7). Israel was an unfaithful bride; she left her bridegroom and prostituted herself to foreign gods (and that's more than just a metaphor). The people of Israel were wandering sheep, disobedient children, an unfruitful vineyard.

The LORD was patient with his people. His patience lasted nearly a thousand years! But when his people persisted in scorning and rejecting their God, they reaped what they had sown. *"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? 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 briars and thorns will grow there. I will command the clouds not to rain on it” (v. 3-6). It sounds harsh, but God is not mocked. Consequences of wicked behavior come in the form of harsh discipline. When you cut yourself off from the very source of life, as Israel chose to do, there's nothing left but death. In the north, ten tribes of Israel were deported by the Assyrians, dispersed and lost to history. The people of Judah in the south endured destruction and captivity. Jerusalem was destroyed by the Babylonians. The city walls were demolished. The temple was destroyed. The inhabitants were butchered by the sword of their enemies. The survivors spent the rest of their lives in captivity in Babylon.

And yet, even through very painful discipline, God showed his love. He restored his people Judah, brought them back from captivity, reestablished them in the land, and he kept his promise to send the Messiah to save his people from their sins. His love never wavered, his compassion never failed.

So how can we relate this to today? In the New Testament, the apostle says, “These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the fulfillment of the ages has come” (1 Corinthians 10:11). It would be easy to compare what happened in the society of Old Testament Israel and Judah and compare it with our society today, but that would be a wrong comparison. This vineyard analogy does not refer to a country or a land, to the United States of America. The USA is not God's chosen nation, as Israel was. Today the vineyard of the Lord is the church of Jesus Christ; we are God's vineyard. The danger for us is that we wring our hands and lament everything that is going on in our culture and fail to examine our own hearts and repent of our own sins. Our own materialism. Our own complacency and indifference. Our own acceptance of what is evil and our willingness to go along to get along. Old Testament Israel prostituted herself to foreign gods; we sell ourselves to stuff, to having more, to image, to the American Dream, to success, to getting ahead. Those things become our idols. Old Testament Judah did nothing to right wrongs and pursue justice; we retreat into our cocoons and comfort zones and do nothing to help our neighbor who is hurting and in need. It's not “those people” who need to repent; it's “this person” (me!) who needs to repent and fall on my knees before God and pray for his mercy. It's you who, along with me, needs to search your heart and examine your life to see where we have sinned and failed to produce good fruit.

And when we do that, with a humble and contrite heart confess our sins, what do we find from God? When we have recognized the depth and damnable nature of our sin, isn't that when we can see most clearly the depth of God's love to us? God loves you! Look at what God has done for you! Look at God's grace to you. He gave you this life with everything you have, your health, your wealth, and the means to provide for those you love. He put it all into your hands, just what you need and so much more for your body and life. But he's done more. The love with which God has loved you reaches from the heights of heaven to the depths of hell. From the heights of heaven the Son of God came from the Father full of grace and truth. Jesus was born of a woman to be our brother, our obedience. His love led him to the cross, where he laid down his life for our sins. He suffered the darkness and anguish of hell to pay the price for our sins. “This is love,” the Bible says, “not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son as the atoning sacrifice for our sins” (1 John 4:10). God filled you with his Holy Spirit, planted faith in your heart to see and believe in Jesus as your Savior from sin. He made you part of his vineyard. He gave you this day of grace, and today he gives you the privilege of producing good fruit, a righteous, upstanding life, the fruit of the Spirit, which is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Those who belong to Christ have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires (Galatians 5:22-24).

This all starts when we see our connection with Jesus as a love story, the history of God's tender love for you and his desire that you should know his love and love him in return. Pray that you may know how high and wide and broad and deep is the love of God in Christ. To cherish nothing more highly than our Savior Jesus and our relationship with him. To treasure nothing more highly than the grace he has shown us by pouring out his blood, forgiving our sins, rescuing us from death and eternal damnation, crowning us with all we need for this life and the next. To produce good fruit in love for God and love for our neighbor. Amen.