

“God’s Pleasant Planting”

Isaiah 5:1-7

(Pg. 634 OT)

Let me sing for my beloved
my love-song concerning his vineyard:

My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill.

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.

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

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?

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.

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.

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!

God's Pleasant Planting

Isaiah 5:1-7

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I.

I am not sure how much of a windup this pitch of a sermon actually requires as it will come smoking hot over the plate in very short order and we're going to hear it smack the catcher's mitt before you know it and we'll be out the door. However, your expectation here today is for a full nine innings, so let's bring out the starting pitcher before we move on to the closer.

A couple of weeks ago I got an email from an old friend, fraternity brother, and good dude by the name of Dave Moshella (aka "Mosh"). He is very active in the alumni association for our college fraternity at Bucknell University, the PA Zeta chapter of Sigma Alpha Epsilon. Mosh helps to put together the quarterly alumni magazine entitled "The Iris," and he asked me if I would be willing to be interviewed for an article about fraternity members who were former college athletes and, later, went on to become ministers or pastors...of which there are exactly two of us: me and a fellow named Graham Robinson.

II.

My first reaction to the request was to tell Mosh he must be scraping the very bottom of the content barrel if this is his next best topic. I told him I appreciated him asking me, that I was honored and, after thinking it, replied that I'd be pleased to be interviewed.

The thing is, though, I know Graham pretty well as we were only a year apart in college. I played football while Graham was the captain of the soccer team. Later we also happened to be in the same graduating class at Princeton Theological Seminary, spending three years there together. In fact, he and I were part of the lone married guys intramural flag-football team which mercilessly crushed both the spirit and flesh of *all* the other teams consisting of considerably younger guys (much to their chagrin). Beyond that, however, our lives and our personalities are *quite* different. His would be deemed by most to be more typical of what you would expect in a minister, and mine... well, perhaps not so much. Nevertheless, each of us went on to become ordained Ministers of Word and Sacrament in the Presbyterian Church (USA).

III.

Graham was, and I assume still is, a very handsome guy...as in he could have been a male model handsome. I never heard him cuss or saw him engage in questionable behavior or habits, and he was universally liked by *everyone*. Me? Well, perhaps not so much on all counts. While Graham was polished and pious (in the best sense of those words) I was a bit rough and anything but religious (at least in the traditional sense of the word). That said, I think everyone who knows us both would consider each to be a good guy; or, in the parlance of our fraternity, a “True Gentlemen” with whom “honor is sacred and virtue safe.”

The last time I saw Graham was in 2014 at fraternity reunion held in New Jersey. It was on that occasion he told me an inside minister joke about being only a few funerals away from the perfect congregation. Which, at the time, I thought was both funny but also somewhat telling; especially given how things turned out as, later, Graham left parish ministry after a bruising experience in the parish with some of God’s children.

IV.

As I understand it, Graham is still doing the Lord’s work as a Hospice Volunteer Coordinator, is a fundraiser for the National Multiple Sclerosis Society, and remains an ordained PC USA minister. Like I said, Graham is a good guy. I grieve, though, that he no longer feels called to work in pastoral ministry in the parish as it is a terrible loss to our denomination as well as to the Body of Christ.

I do not know all the ins and outs of Graham’s journey but, unfortunately, his is the kind of story that one hears all too frequently. Parish ministry can, and very often is, an *extremely* tough gig. According to our denomination’s own research, the average tenure of a pastor at a church is 4 years, and 25% of all our ministers leave the denomination within 5 to 7 years.

As you might imagine, all of this got me scratching my head. How has a person like *me* managed 33 years in parish ministry, with 27 of those years at the same church, while one like Graham (Mr. All-American / model of virtue / Eagle Scout type) is no longer in the parish?

V.

The most obvious answer is undoubtedly also the most correct: it is about the congregation in these churches and *not* about the particular pastor. However rough I may have been upon my arrival in Canton recognize it could have been much worse if not for the five excellent years in my first call where I was mentored, shepherded, and broken-in by a good many remarkable people; particularly from those in one of my former yoked churches (Allegany 1st Presbyterian which has since closed, unfortunately).

I am convinced they put me on the right path, and labored mightily to keep me there so I might, eventually, arrive here. I would argue that I was even *more* fortunate to have landed here on the Park; which is the *only* other congregation that would have me, even though the Presbytery clearly did *not* want me here. These experiences have shown me that in order for a church to succeed, thrive, and grow, the congregation must bring out and nurture the best in the pastor, and the pastor must bring out and nurture the best in the congregation.

VI.

As I said in last week's sermon, this summer I have been taking the 10,000 foot view of my ministry, and it is at this point we are going to call up the relief pitcher from the bullpen to smoke one over your plate not only about the secret to surviving and thriving in parish ministry, but also the secret to the life of faith and the spiritual journey. Some of us may have heard this before. If so, it would seem we need to hear it again.

Today's scripture reading from Isaiah 5 comes to us as an imaged love song that God is singing to God's beloved concerning the vineyard God has given them. Ostensibly, these who are the house of Israel and the people of Judah are God's pleasant planting. However, where God expected justice, only bloodshed was seen. Which, as you might well imagine, turned out to be not a very good thing *at all*. God's disappointment and anguish over Israel's failure to live up to their covenant relationship was accompanied by some very hard real world lessons which resulted in a great deal of pain and suffering for the people.

VII.

The song of the vineyard, then, affirms something which I believe lies at the heart of both parish ministry and our individual spiritual journeys. To be clear, this is not something which *I*, myself, dreamed up. Instead it is something that this congregation, and one of my previous congregations, helped me to discover. I've just had the good sense to recognize it for what it is, and have been determined (or stubborn) enough to continue to apply it to our life together. He comes the pitch, ready? There are only two prayers in life. The first is to simply say, "Thank You" to God. The second, is to not get hit any harder *next* time when we fail to learn the lesson we should be learning *this* time.

VIII.

These two prayers, in a nutshell, are what the life of faith is all about. The first prayer comes to us from the the 14th century German priest, theologian, philosopher, and mystic Meister Eckhart who wrote, "If the only prayer you ever say in your entire life is thank you, it will be enough." 33 years of parish ministry has taught me that this is absolutely correct. Unfortunately, though, when people get distracted, confused, forgetful, or just plain lazy and stop saying or, more importantly stop *living*, the "Thank You" prayer, bad things invariably ensue which, then, creates the need for the second prayer: to not get hit any harder *next* time when we fail to recognize the lesson we should be learning *this* time.

This second prayer comes to us from my woods hippie, horse-logger, wilderness mystic friend Mark Adams who lives out in northern Minnesota. He is convinced, and I agree, the same lesson will keep presenting itself to us until we finally learn what it has to teach and, apparently, what God wants us to learn. With increasingly negative consequence if we do not.

IX.

Or, to see it in the context of today's scripture reading from Isaiah 5, like the people of Israel we, too, are God's pleasant planting. We have been given a wonderful life here on this earth (vineyard) along with all the things we need to enjoy, make use of, and share this life to the glory of God. In exchange, God expects us to yield the fruit which comes from doing justice, loving mercy, and walking humbly with our God. Failure to do so is a sign of insufficient

gratitude for the grace and blessings we have received. Inevitably, this leads to a harvest of sour grapes which are, at best, of no use to anyone or, at worse, lead to an untold *slew* of bad things which do harm to all those around us, and to our very own selves.

X.

When we stop being thankful we lose the capacity and desire to do justice and live with righteousness. The only real lesson in life, one we need to learn every time and all the time, is to be thankful we have been planted so pleasantly by God's grace. Let us endeavor to live a life of "Thank you." If we do, we have learned the greatest lesson God has ever, and is always, trying to teach us. Amen.