

## Gardening Issues

It has been several years now since I have tried even limited gardening. Growing up, my parents planted about half an acre—well about a quarter of that was Mom’s strawberry bed, but the rest was plowed and rowed each spring, prepared for planting with the vegetables which would be harvested that summer, used and then canned or frozen for the winter. Even just a few years ago, I set aside some space for a few tomato plants, some squash and zucchini, okra and cucumber plants in my yard within a raised “flower bed.” I would study the various springtime plant offerings at the store as I made choices, take them home and then carefully weed and water, try to protect them from insects and birds and await the fruit of my labors. Usually the weeds, bugs, rabbits and birds harvested much more than I did, so now I harvest my summer crops at the local farmer’s market on Wednesdays as I go home. Many of these issues are the stories which face anyone who farms, who plants and tends a living, growing thing—not just a garden. This type of scenario can and often is a metaphor for parenting—human, and as in the example from our Hebrew Scripture this morning—divine parenting. Isaiah 5: 1 and 2 sets the stage for this particular metaphor. In it Isaiah describes God’s viewpoint of Israel’s people—for throughout much of Hebrew Scriptures Israel is either God’s flock or vineyard. In the metaphors God has chosen and covenanted with these people, promised them to be their God and been faithful to them, led them through the desert to the Promised Land and “planted them” in that land of milk and honey. In the desert they were given the instructions and guidance which would allow them to live together in a community based on justice and righteousness. In today’s passage we hear again, Isaiah tells of God’s grief over the results of this planting: “Let me sing for my beloved my love song—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.” The vineyard’s description is a very literal one for a Palestinian vineyard. They are placed on terraced hills which have to be cleared of stones which are then used to form the terraces; watchtowers and wine vats for grape processing are also built within the vineyard; one for protection of the crop, the other for the harvesting. All possible preparations to ensure a good outcome are made; so the expectation for a “good crop” is truly not just “hoped” for, but what should happen. Yet the careful preparations did not ensure the expected result, instead of the cultivated grapes, the plants yielded “wild grapes”. The Hebrew word used actually translates better as “worthless or stinky things”, but I suppose the translators figured grape vines had to produce some form of grape. After all this care, the passage quickly turns from a love song to a trial, “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?’” There is no answer given here, as to the “why” the people, including us continue to yield “wild grapes”. God’s word at this time seems to be that the vineyard will no longer be protected but devoured; and indeed there were consequences for the people of Israel. The tone of the passage is that judgment is pronounced, but it is important for us to understand that the judgment which comes is the result of the people’s choices—it is not punishment enacted by God, but the result of the set of destructive consequences which their choices have caused. The people are called to judge between what God has done to protect

them and the actions—the fruits which the vineyard has produced. What the vineyard has produced is summed up in verse 7 of the Isaiah passage: “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! In other words, the people have rejected the terms of the relationship which God desired which would have created a community where justice and righteousness would prevail; God had prepared the way for that community and the people chose another way; the result was injustice, bloodshed and oppression. Not the kingdom of God on earth. When Isaiah describes God’s kingdom, those passages are referred to as descriptions of the peaceable kingdom. Isaiah of Jerusalem lived in the 8<sup>th</sup> century before the birth of Jesus, and in Luke’s narrative of that event tells of the angelic hosts’ message about peace on earth and good will to men. The opening verse of the passage from Luke’s narrative this morning seems to have Jesus giving an entirely different message. Luke 12:49—“I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!” If we consider the context of this passage, Jesus has set his face to Jerusalem and is nearing the completion of his earthly ministry. This probably explains some of verse 50: “I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed!” Within in this text there is also a reference to the past and what John the Baptist said of Jesus, that he would bring a baptism of fire; there is also a foreshadowing of the coming of the Holy Spirit and the flames which would embolden the disciples to leave the upper room and spread the good news. Neither of these images are exactly those of the peaceful kingdom. And that is the reality of which Jesus speaks when he voices the question found in verse 51: “Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!” In verses 52 and 53, he describes what happens when some within a family become believers and others do not, which happened. In fact, the split in the Jewish community where some “Christ followers” were expelled from the synagogue of their birth led to much bitterness within families. These were realities which happened; in some ways the call to follow Jesus when answered still creates divisions within our communities today. When you examine the ministry of Jesus, the time that he spent here on earth as we have recorded in our scriptures, that time was spent with the marginalized in the society of his day, those who were the outcasts. He spent his time and his power in healing and restoration; teaching that his disciples not to fear but to love. Any criticism that he offered was to those who were supposed to protect them and didn’t. As the time nears when Jesus is going to enter Jerusalem, he tries to prepare his disciples for what is to come, telling them that continuing to follow what he has taught is not going to be easy; it is not going to be peaceful. The fire which Jesus speak of bring can be viewed within at least two of the images we associate with fire. Fire can be a very destructive force—a divisive force. But there is another aspect of fire. Fire can be used to purify—to burn away impurities. If we view the fire which Jesus says he came to bring as a way of cleansing us of our impurities, then yes, there is judgment. But not one that destroys; it is one that allows repentance and forgiveness. This does not mean that there is no pain, because it often means giving up something, some dearly held self-conception for example, but it then allows healing and moving forward. We then can view our actions or inactions in terms of their effects on others; we can then move toward working on those things that will allow God’s vineyard to produce the good fruit of justice and righteousness which is the fruit which God always desires from those God has claimed. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

