

What Kind of Fruit?

This is the time of year when folks begin to reap the fruit of their gardening efforts; or in my case now, enjoying the fruit of others efforts at Farmer's Markets. When buying locally at a Farmer's market the produce you find is fresher than that at the supermarket, but it also may not look as uniform or "pretty" because it may still have some dirt on it; perhaps appear a little more irregular in shape than the supermarket offerings...but in almost every instance, the taste will live up to your expectations. The passage from Isaiah 5:1-7 is a passage about God's expectations of those chosen to be God's people in the form of an allegory about God's vineyard...and the sorrow felt that the people chosen and envisioned were not those seen in the society that had been created in the Promised Land that God had provided them. In last week's passage taken from Isaiah 1:10-20, the vision described God's opinion about how worship was being done by the people. Despite the rituals being mentioned were those given to the people in Deuteronomy and Leviticus the manner in which they occurred angered God. That passage made the case that God values justice among the chosen people as much as, if not more than worship. Worship rituals by those who did not follow the behavior outlined in the covenant did not find acceptance in God's eyes. Everyday behavior demonstrating justice and righteousness mattered more. In this passage's allegory of the vineyard it seems that the establishment of a just society was the single desired outcome of God's relationship with Israel and Judah. By failing to achieve this, they have both angered and grieved God. This text, often called the "Song of the Vineyard" is a sophisticated presentation of an allegory. It contains frequent shifts in speaker and perspective which demand careful attention through much of the poem which continues long after these seven verses. There is a carefully developed central metaphor and has striking metaphors in verse 7 which contribute to its power, especially when viewed in the Hebrew language. It begins with the prophet as the speaker singing what seems to be a love song on behalf of his beloved. Here there is no indication whom the beloved might be in the first verse. Matters become a bit clearer with the second portion of the verse where the beloved turns out to be the owner of a vineyard on a hill. The second verse tells how the owner of this land has worked to prepare it for the "choice vines" that would be planted. The vineyard owner spared no expense in labor or resources to ensure the productiveness of his vineyard, expecting a rich and abundant crop of grapes from these "choice vines." But his hopes and expectations are not fulfilled; instead of the expected grapes, the vines produce "wild grapes", grapes which are unusable, bitter, and the Hebrew description actually suggests that they emit a rancid odor. Definitely not what the owner expected after the resources given to make the vineyard produce a pleasing crop. This takes us about halfway through today's passage. At this point the speaker continues the allegory with both a lament and a question which reveals his grief as a complaint is addressed to the inhabitants of Jerusalem and Judah: "What more was there to do in my vineyard that I have not done in it? When I expected it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes?" The people of Judah are asked to judge for themselves what should be done about such an offensive, unproductive vineyard. God appears frustrated by what has occurred and moves to take action to remove the unproductive vines; the protective elements of hedge and watchtower will be removed so that the vines will be devoured as no more care will be forthcoming. Judgment is coming for the production of this

“unfruitful” fruit. The last verse in today’s passage makes clear exactly what God fruit God was expecting from the Divine efforts with the people: “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!” The English translation makes clear what God expected and what was actually produced. However, the Hebrew words here illustrate something important that it is easy to overlook if all we see is the English. The bountiful harvest for which God hoped was a just society, but the inedible grapes God received instead are violence and oppression. In Hebrew this contrast is highlighted by the fact that these words “justice” and “injustice” differ by only one letter. The same is true for the words for righteousness and cry where the word translated as cry recalls the outcry of the people of Sodom and that of the Hebrews who were slaves in Egypt. This passage hints that God made a choice and that this choice was more than a momentary act of will. God did not choose a people and then withdraw, not even after leading them through the wilderness to the Promised Land. God choose them with a view to relationship between God and people and among the people. God’s vision was that the fruit of that relationship would be justice and righteousness. And to that end God invested God’s own labor and planning; determination and solicitous care accompany an optimistic expectation of divine delight in the fruits of intimacy with God’s people. Isaiah’s audience has known this intimacy, but the no longer see the work of God’s hands among them. The rhetorical question asked “what more could God have done” has an implied answer. The implied answer is that there was nothing more God could have done to prepare the ground for justice and flourishing as a community. God wasn’t the one who should have done more. The love story which began the passage perished without mutual care and self-giving; without that it was bound for disaster. The people were given the freedom to respond to God faithfully, but because people have been given that freedom, things can and do go wrong. This has important ramifications when the topic of the judgment which is described is considered. From the prophet’s writing it is to be seen that judgment is not be understood as God’s need to punish or to get even with the sinful people. Rather, judgment is the set of destructive consequences that result from the people’s own choices. God is essentially gracious and caring as shown by what God does and then hopes for and expects. People’s choices have prevented those expectations from being fulfilled. The vines in the vineyard produced fruit, but it was not good fruit. In many ways the same can be said of our lives because the choices we make often fail to produce the results in our society that God desires. There is much in our society that is not just; there are many examples in our culture where our choices have led to violence, bloodshed and cries from those who are victims. The gospel passage for today also addresses the current conditions around us which have developed from our choices that are not aligned with God’s as revealed in Jesus’ life. This passage comes from Luke’s travel narrative about Jesus’ teachings after he has set his face toward Jerusalem and what will occur there. With all the divisiveness present in our society these days, it seems that the last thing we need to be reading about is an image where Jesus portrays his coming as bring division, not the peace we love to believe he brings into the world. This particular section of Luke gives us three different parts about Jesus’ mission. The first is a quick summary of teaching just before the first verse of today’s reading. Jesus then describes how his earthly ministry will end—the baptism of fire which he will undergo in Jerusalem and how stressful that

is to anticipate. When we hear this word about a baptism of fire we tend to think about judgment, but this also lifts up for us the truth that fire of judgment is about our inability to save ourselves; fire is also spoken of within scripture as a refining and purifying force. Jesus will undergo this baptism of fire for our sakes. In the second portion of this passage is Jesus teaching those gathered around him that following him will not be easy just as for him to follow God's purpose for him creates stress within him. By the time Luke's narrative is written the reality that following Jesus' way brings divisions has become reality. Those of the Jewish tradition who have accepted Christ have been ejected from their synagogues, there is strife within families as some have become followers while their loved ones do not...divisions aplenty are recorded from those times as a consequence of following the path and teachings of Jesus Christ. There is also a more basic result which applied to our lives. The realities and concerns which occupy Luke's community—issues of wealth and poverty are still real for us. The divisions of which Jesus speaks are largely due divisions in the here and now about those issues. The division which occurs is the result of the purifying fire his teachings bring. The kingdom of God he proclaims represents a new order governed not by might but by forgiveness as shown by the importance of forgiveness within the prayer he taught. The parameters of that kingdom have not changed, just as it is not yet fully among us. This kingdom proclaimed but not yet here is governed not by fear but by courage, and not by power but by humility. Those invested in the present order, those lured by the temptations of wealth, status and power; and those who rule now resist this coming kingdom for it spells an end to what they know and love or at the very least have become accustomed to accepting as the way things should be. Thus Jesus—though coming to establish a rule of peace and love brings division whenever those teachings are brought to life within the culture. In Luke's context following Christ was either just not generally accepted but often persecuted. In our context in North American, Christianity has long been not just accepted but almost expected. This isn't true world-wide, but is the reality for us. But all of this raises a question that might be worth considering. Is the relative ease of the Christian life in this land entirely the result of cultural acceptance or is it because we fail to live into the gospel Jesus announced? Throughout Luke's account, Jesus announces the creation of a new community—he calls it the kingdom of God—that is governed not by power but by equity, where all those in need are cared for, where forgiveness is the norm, where the poor are privileged, where wealth is shared rather than hoarded, and where the weak and lowly are honored. Sometimes the good news promised in the gospel narratives lead us into a kind of pious indolence where we come to believe that our failures and shortcomings aren't all that serious for we have the promise that there is nothing we can do to lose that forgiveness or the larger inheritance of abundant life that Jesus won for us. But sometimes that promise of forgiveness and life might also lead us to a kind of holy engagement with the teachings where we commit ourselves once again to being “people of the Way,” people who strive to follow Jesus in word and deed knowing that the path we trod follows his own and that he accompanies us on it. Perhaps it will lead to examining the fruit which comes from those things we say and do and allow to be said and done around us. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.