

Sermon – Matthew 21:33-46; Isaiah 5:1-7

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Grace Lutheran Church

18 Pentecost – Year A

4 October 2020

“Grapes of Grace”

Sisters and brothers, friends in Christ, grace be unto you and peace this day, in the name of God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. You should have seen it before! Such words are uttered with a wistful nod to the past, when main street stores still bustled with activity or the farmstead was in its prime. A visitor to a boulevard of boarded-up storefronts or to overgrown acreage with broken-down buildings would be hard pressed to see what others can only remember: a time when things used to be better.
2. Our texts today transport to moments of time *after* when we should have seen it. The common thread is the vineyard, the fertile land from which God intended to produce good growth. The Lord, with a farmer’s hands-on approach, has done everything imaginable for the vineyard. This is not just a job for God, nor a weekend hobby. This is God’s passion project. So Isaiah: “God dug it and cleared it of stones; and planted it with choice vines. God built a watchtower in the midst of it, and hewed out a vine vat in it.” The imagery is intentionally Edenic; the vineyard is perfect, poised to burst forth with good grapes; one imagines the good wine these grapes will become. Except this isn’t what happens. God expected grapes but the grapes went wild, the wine sour. Isaiah doesn’t trust us to make the obvious connection to our lives, so he connects the dots for us: “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 held up God’s end of the bargain, but the grapes went bad.

3. Grapes can't mount a rebellion against the vinedresser, but their analogues can and do. And that's us. To be sure, we are not the people of Judah 2,700 years ago. But we are not so different. We, too, have been gifted a world of promise and plenty, abounding in goodness. What hasn't the Lord provided for us? And what have we done with it? We have yielded neither justice nor righteousness; the fruit of our vine is bloodshed and a cry. Things have quite simply gone wrong, and while it is true that sometimes bad things just happen, it is also true that so much human suffering is the fruit of our rebellion against God. So it is that while we are not responsible for the existence of COVID-19, we *are* responsible for our less than stellar response. How did we let things get to the point where more than 200,000 Americans and over one million people worldwide have died? Now the virus has even reached the White House; today we pray for the full and fast recovery of President and Mrs. Trump and for all people who are ill. To look in another direction, we are not responsible for the fact that human beings come with many different skin colors, but we *are* responsible for turning these signs of God's diverse palette into a ranking system of worth and value, imagining that lighter is better than darker. We are responsible for the legacy and the ongoing reality of racism, whether we ourselves harbor racist attitudes or not. In these and in so many other things, we see that sin is not simply our own small misdeeds or, more comfortably, the misdeeds of others. Sin is the breakdown of the system, the ruination of the vineyard, in which we are all complicit. We are in bondage and we cannot free ourselves.
4. Isaiah's words are a sweeping indictment of a world that too often lets evil off the hook. But God will not. Note, however, what God does. God does not punish. God does not inflict hurt. No, God simply allows our actions to create their natural consequences. The hedge is removed, the wall trampled down. The rain stops falling and the workers stop tending. We begin to reap what we sow: wild, wrathful grapes. God lets us have the world we create for a

- time. God wanted justice and righteousness; instead, as thanks for this very good creation, we repay God with violence.
5. But this is not where God leaves us. Isaiah was one of many messengers, prophets sent to return the tenants to wise stewardship. It was a failed project, but God wouldn't give up on it. Finally, in the fullness of time, the Father sends the Son into the vineyard. In a full-scale if foolish act of total insurrection, the tenants seize the heir and put him to death, convincing themselves that this will be the end of it and the vineyard will be theirs. The parable demands judgment; even the chief priests and the scribes can see it, saying that the owner should put these miserable wretches to death and give the vineyard to someone else. This, after all, would be the logical conclusion of actions having consequences. In the final analysis, the crimes of the perpetrators should redound upon their heads. After ruining the vineyard for everyone else, they should be ruined, too. But this is not where God leaves us.
 6. In response to their clamor for capital punishment, Jesus flips the script. "Have you never read the scriptures?" The stone rejected, the Son put to death, does not lead to more rejection, more death. Instead, it is out of this death that the vineyard will take on new life, and it will be amazing in our eyes, a wonder to behold. In his continued response to the nature of his authority, Jesus once again points to the coming cross of Calvary. The Son has come into the vineyard. The Son is being rejected. The Son will be killed. And oddly, in the mysterious goodness of the God who finally lets us off the hook, it is this death that will bring new life, new growth, in the Kingdom of God. His rejected stone will be taken back up, and it will crush those upon whom it falls in judgment. But what do you get when you crush grapes? Good wine. Jesus' mission and ministry are converging on the singular point where our rebellion meets God's grace. Where we expect to see the final falling apart, God suddenly makes all things new. You should have seen it then? Wait until you see it now!

7. Nine years and two children ago, Erika and I travelled to Europe for the wedding of a dear friend. Since it didn't make sense to fly over only for the wedding, we made a trip out of it. We started in Dresden, Germany, a town to which I'd never been. The highlight of our brief stay was seeing the Frauenkirche, a breathtaking baroque church near the banks of the Elbe. I was aware of the history but could only view the church in the present. It is a church both majestic and intimate, but so are a great many churches in Europe. But then I saw the look on Erika's face, who was viewing the same scene but from a vastly different point of view. She had seen this church before, but not like this. The Frauenkirche, as you may know, was destroyed in February 1945. Allied forces firebombed Dresden, dropping 650,000 incendiary devices on this city in an incredibly short time. The church held out for two days, but the heat of the fires finally caused the eight interior sandstone pillars to explode; the church collapsed, disappearing from the skyline. The East Germans left the rubble as a monument to the war, or perhaps as an indication of their unconcern for the Christian faith. But in the 1990s, the desire to rebuild started, well, to build. The project began. And that's when Erika first saw the Frauenkirche, as a pile of rubble. A blueprint existed, but all she had witnessed were stones in the early stage of sorting. A decade later, we walked under the cathedral's dome, a miracle in itself. To rebuild the church required more millions of stones, but the work did not begin from scratch. 3,800 stones were salvaged from the destruction, reused to resurrect a house for the Lord. Having seen it as rubble, seeing it rebuilt was a sign of hope, a reversal of this world's entropy illustrative of God's restorative goodness. It is a resurrection.
8. The great twist of grace, dear sinners, is that when the landowner shows up, he won't demand the rent, or restitution for damage done, or retribution for killing the Son. No, God will simply raise Jesus from the dead and rebuild again. But not simply to salvage what once was. Not to recreate some golden

age that never really existed. No, God is building something new. Something that could only be built upon a stone rejected, for true life can only begin when death is defeated. Our actions will have consequences; the Son will be killed. But God will not him, or us, there. By no means. You, once trapped in sin, are forgiven. The rejected stone has been lifted up and a new world is being built upon this firm foundation. And *that* will be a wonder to behold. Amen.

And now may the peace that passes all human understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.