

“That’s Not How the Story Goes”

Reading: Isaiah 5:1-7; Matthew 21:33-46

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I grew up reading more than a few Batman comic books, because as we all know, Batman is by far the coolest superhero of them all. It’s just possible, in fact, that I have a couple of Batman comics tucked into the library in my office, just in case I need them. But even if you’re not a fan of Batman or comic books, you probably know at least the main points of Batman’s story: Bruce Wayne, heir to the Wayne family fortune, witnesses his parents’ murder as a boy and grows up to become an expert martial artist and detective, dressed as a bat to inspire fear in the criminals of Gotham City, aided by his ever-faithful butler Alfred, often accompanied by his boy wonder sidekick, Robin. There are countless ways of telling the story — Batman was campy and colorful in the sixties Adam West TV show, while the most recent adaptations are dark and gritty — but there’s still the core of the story that we all know.

The same could be said for all kinds of other stories and characters we love. Fairy tales and nursery rhymes, children’s stories and myths, TV shows and movies — there are countless stories that are part of our cultural knowledge, stories and characters that we all probably know at least a little bit about even if we haven’t seen or read the source material. You don’t have to have read any Sherlock Holmes to form a picture of him in your mind, or Batman, or Little Red Riding Hood, or Dracula, or David and Goliath. So when you come across a telling of the story that doesn’t fit the mold, you take notice. If Bruce Wayne’s parents weren’t murdered, or if Goliath beats David, you think, “Wait a minute, that’s not how the story goes.” Maybe the storyteller just isn’t very good and doesn’t really know the story, or maybe they’re changing the story for a reason. Sometimes people change the core of a story to surprise you out of what you think you knew.

That’s exactly what we see Jesus doing in our gospel reading today. He’s taking a well-known image and playing with it, not because He doesn’t know how the story is supposed to go, but because He wants to bring new meaning and relevance to a familiar idea. It may not be as familiar of a story to us today, but to Jesus’ audience at that time, it was something they encountered pretty regularly in their worship and study of Scriptures. This image of God’s people as a vineyard or as a fruit-producing vine, and the idea that they are being judged by God the farmer on the basis of the fruit they produce, is something that shows up regularly in the Old Testament prophets. Prophets like Isaiah and Ezekiel often make use of this agricultural imagery to explain to God’s people what God thinks.

We read one of those passages from Isaiah. The message is that God has been a good farmer, but his vineyard has failed to produce fruit. It leaves us with the question, then, of what the farmer ought to do with that vineyard. He gave it every opportunity; there was no reason for it to produce anything other than the best grapes. He chose a fertile spot for it, and He prepared the soil by removing any stones, and He planted the best vines He could get, and He protected it from animals and thieves by building a hedge and a watchtower, and He even built a winepress in anticipation of the crop that would surely come; He was expecting results from this vineyard. “Judge between me and my vineyard,” He says. “What more could I have done for my vineyard than I have done for it?”

Where does the fault lie in this vineyard’s failure? It’s not the farmer’s fault, so therefore the problem must lie in the vines. And in that case, who can blame the farmer for clearing out those

vines? Isaiah preaches this message in anticipation of what God is about to do in His land: the vineyard is the nation of Israel, and the people are the vines. God did amazing, miraculous things through many generations to save this nation and prepare the land and guide them in serving Him, but they produced bad grapes. Therefore, God is preparing to remove the hedge protecting the vineyard; He's no longer going to protect them, and is sending powerful foreign nations against them to remove the "vines" by taking them into exile.

That's the basic story that gets used to a greater or lesser degree in a variety of places in the Old Testament. Jesus' audience, and especially the educated folks that He often debated, surely would have been very familiar with the imagery of God's nation as God's vineyard. Jesus starts His parable by basically retelling Isaiah's parable: "There was a landowner who planted a vineyard. He put a wall around it, dug a winepress in it and built a watchtower." So far, it's basically the same. "Then he rented the vineyard to some farmers and moved to another place." Wait a minute, that's not how the story goes. Who are these renters? And then this parable gets even stranger, because the vineyard produces fruit, but the tenants forcefully withhold the crop from the vineyard's owner. They attack and kill the servants sent by the owner to receive the crop. The owner gives them another chance, and they do the same thing. The owner gives them a third chance, this time by sending his own son, and the tenants absurdly think they can claim the son's inheritance by killing him.

This is not how the story is supposed to go, Jesus. But His message is clear: the landowner "will bring those wretches to a wretched end, and he will rent the vineyard to other tenants." Jesus is speaking with the religious leadership of the nation during this exchange, so the point of the parable is very pointed indeed. In fact, the passage concludes by telling us that this contributes to their desire to arrest Jesus the troublemaker. His message is that these leaders were intended to be God's stewards, guiding His people, but instead they have overstepped their bounds, exploited God's vineyard, and usurped authority that was not theirs.

Jesus has taken Isaiah's parable about God's people's failure to produce fruit and injected it with a new strain of rebellion. This is not merely a mistake, or even a failure, or even an excess on the part of God's people. This has now strayed into outright rebellion, rejection of God's messages to the point of attacking God's Son. It is laying claim to God's kingdom as one's own.

It would seem as though this parable preached at Jesus' audience in His time, but isn't really relevant for us today. The point was that the religious leaders of Jesus' time had failed in their calling, and God removed them from leadership to raise up the church. The work of Christ opened the way for all nations to join in the fruitful work of the vineyard. And while it's true that the first meaning of this parable applied specifically to Jesus' time and audience, it's also true that it leaves us with a powerful warning for those of us who have continued the work of God's vineyard. The question remains for all of the workers, not just of whether we are bearing fruit, but whether we are bearing fruit for the glory of our Lord.

Here's the issue that continues to challenge us today, thousands of years after Jesus and Isaiah: we need to look very carefully at what God considers fruitfulness in His vineyard. What are the good grapes God is looking for? What is it He wants us to cultivate? There are a number of ways we can answer that, because of course living in the kingdom of God impacts every aspect of our lives. But I know that for me, I tend to assume that the fruit God is looking for relates to personal holiness. I

assume that we're talking about things like the fruit of the Spirit — love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, and so on — virtues that I cultivate within myself to make me a better, more loving, more holy person. And that's certainly important; God wants us to grow that fruit. But if we think that's how the story is told, we might be surprised at how Isaiah tells it. We might be surprised to see some of the varieties of grapes God wants us to grow.

Let's take a closer look at what Isaiah says. In verse 7, Isaiah begins to parse out the meaning of his parable: "The vineyard of the Lord Almighty is the nation of Israel, and the people of Judah are the vines he delighted in." And what is the fruit? "He looked for justice, but saw bloodshed; for righteousness, but heard cries of distress." This fruit is not merely personal holiness or virtue or goodness, and it's not simply being loving toward one another, as important as all of those are. This is fruit that impacts all of society. It's fruit that impacts our justice system, our economic practices, our governments, and our social action. Isaiah gets arguably even more political than Jesus does in this parable. If we continue on through the chapter, he goes into more detail about the sorts of things God is angry about. "Woe to you who add house to house and join field to field till no space is left and you live alone in the land," he says. "Woe to those who rise early in the morning to run after their drinks." "Woe to those who call evil good and good evil." Woe to those "who acquit the guilty for a bribe." It's almost as though there is a progression from the pursuit of wealth, leading to a lifestyle of indolence, leading to an attitude of arrogance, leading to a perversion of morality, culminating in a subversion of justice toward the poor.

He is preaching against the decadent wealth and abuses of power that are on display. The bad grapes are those who have the money to spend their days at ease, drinking and partying, while they buy up the land to build giant estates and huge mansions, leaving no room for the poor to make a living. And, what's worse, they then cheat the legal system so that those who can't pay for top-dollar lawyers have no hope of justice. The arrogance sickens God. He planted a good vineyard, but it is being abused. His good cultivation has been co-opted for the extravagance of the few.

Jesus does not go into the same detail that Isaiah does, but this concern for a just society that is honoring to God in all of its institutions is clearly held by Jesus as well throughout His ministry. He preaches "good news to the poor," He is sent to "set the oppressed free," He proclaims the year of Jubilee in which slaves are freed and debts are canceled. In His parable He says that "the stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone;" His kingdom represents a reversal of fortunes and an elevation of the humble. What's more, "the Lord has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes."

So the question remains for us today: what sort of fruit is God looking for in His vineyard? Are we producing that fruit, and are we withholding the benefit of that fruit for our own gain? The concern of God's kingdom is not merely individual, personal holiness that is enough to get you into heaven, maybe even enough to influence your family, but goes no further than that. The holiness God is looking for in His people is so powerful that it shatters unjust structures, it challenges the arrogant, it humbles the powerful, it brings freedom to the oppressed, and it gives hope to the forgotten. We cannot lay claim to the fruits of God's kingdom without also having the concerns of God's kingdom.

What this means is that God has something to say about the thorny political issues of our time. We have ongoing debates about things like welfare, immigration, war, inequality among genders and races, and many other social concerns, and they are often devilishly complex in today's

world. Solutions are rarely simple and clear and easily packaged in a sound bite, and we need to be intelligent advocates for change and educate ourselves as much as we can on the issues of the day. But we serve a God who is holy and just, and He calls us to be holy and just, and as citizens of His kingdom, He calls us to work toward a society that rejects things like arrogance and exploitation and injustice. He calls us to live out our holiness in such a way that it creates a more kingdom-like world for future generations.

We do this not because the church is a social services organization, or because of some secular humanist utopian goal, or because we believe that we can build the kingdom of God on earth. We take up this call because the kingdom of God is breaking into the world through the church. We do not build God's kingdom; God has revealed it through Jesus Christ and calls us to live in it here and now before it comes in its fullness with the return of Christ. By doing so, we help reveal that in-breaking of God's kingdom, and we demonstrate its reality to an unbelieving world, and we make our lives a declaration of allegiance to the Lord.

We are now one month away from our country's midterm elections. This is a call to pray, thoughtfully and carefully, for our nation as we make decisions about our leadership. We are blessed to have a say in the course of our country, so I call you to be guided by our Lord in your decisions, and to pray for our nation as you do.

Benediction: The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; the Lord has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes. Go and serve our Lord and King, Jesus Christ.



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