

Today's text is a difficult text to read and interpret, as almost all of our Isaiah texts will be I'm sure. I had a hard time choosing a pathway forward because there were so many options to choose from when deciding how to pursue the text's purpose. I bring this up because I believe that it is important for every congregation to hear that no one sermon will cover the full breadth and depth of any given text as there is always more to say.

I took a look at today's text with the usual approach I take to exegesis and did some brief research on the text's origins and original audience. Isaiah here had the difficult task that all prophets have of being God's voice to the people especially those who are in charge. Isaiah was delivering God's word to the people of Judah who would have seen Israel fall to the Assyrian armies after they failed to listen to the prophet Amos.

Amos and Isaiah have a lot in common given that both of them are greatly concerned with Justice and Righteousness. Isaiah is concerned that if the people of Judah namely the leader's don't turn their act around the same fate that befell Israel would befall Judah. The people of Judah may have felt emboldened by the fact that Jerusalem God's holy city was within their walls, but they would fall all the same in time to come.

Isaiah tried to share God's message in many ways, sometimes directly, and in other ways using more unique methods which we read in today's text. Isaiah starts off by saying he is singing for a loved one, and a love song at that for this loved person's vineyard.

He explains that the loved one had a vineyard on fertile hillside, dug the earth, cleared the stones, planted it with excellent vines, built a tower inside it and dug out a wine vat, and though it was expected good grapes would grow rotten grapes grew.

Now different translations have different words here, sometimes it is translated as wild grapes instead of bad grapes, sometimes they are sour or worthless, the exact word choice is unclear but what is clear is that these grapes are not what the owner expected.

The story begins to shift tone inviting the audience to judge what should be done with such a field. After informing the audience of the judgement that is being decided for the vineyard, and it's eminent destruction. Isaiah then pulls back the curtain to reveal this is not an imaginary vineyard nor

was this ever really a song, in fact this is a message for the people of Jerusalem and Judah.

This is a very poignant call to repentance from the people of Judah and more importantly the rulers of Jerusalem. Isaiah uses clever wordplay in Hebrew that doesn't quite translate to English, by saying that God expected *mishpat* (*justice*) but instead finds *mishpah* (bloodshed), God expects *tsedakah* (righteousness) but instead there is *tseakah* (a cry of distress)

And while it can be easy to dismiss this text out of hand because Isaiah wrote this message for people in a specific time and place, about their impending Judgement. I fear that this text may have more in common with us than we care for.

If God expects Justice from God's people, are we delivering it for the almighty? Or are we delivering more bloodshed and suffering to God's doorstep. God expects righteousness to be upheld and delivered, and there are still cries of distress across the globe.

This is a heavy text, with a heavy message not just for the people of Judah but for us as well. Are we delivering righteousness and justice to not only the people of God but to the people around us... I am not sure.

Now, I don't want to dismiss this text from Isaiah, and I want to sit in this space together where we question if we are doing enough for the church and for our communities, but I also have a bone to pick with bad metaphors.

You see in Isaiah's metaphorical song here, he refers to the people of Israel as the vineyard of the Lord, and the people of Judah are the plantings. Which is an odd metaphor, because that would indicate that people of Judah are planted inside of Israel and Israel itself bears no fruit but the people of Judah do. Which... leaves some confusing answers upon examination.

But my main issue with this metaphor, confusing final lines aside, is that Isaiah asks the audience, "What more could have been done for my vineyard than I have done for it?" And my only assumption here is that Isaiah has no idea how vineyards work, because there is a lot more work

that goes into a vineyard than having fertile soil, clearing stones, planting good vines, and setting up the space with a tower and wine vat.

Yes, those are an incredible amount of legwork that need to be done, but once you plant a vine you cannot just leave it and ignore it. I've done my fair share of gardening vegetables and tending to plants, and so I thought surely there must be more to this than plant and leave or everyone would have a vineyard.

And sure enough I was right, vines need to be tended to in multiple ways. You need to check on them as they age so you can gather them up during peak ripeness. While they are growing you need to cut away excess leaves so the grapes are exposed to the sunlight and are where you can access them.

As the grapes grow you need to cut away excess clusters because if you have too many grapes on a vine not all of them will receive enough nutrients and you will lose the whole lot rather than having several healthy and delicious bunches.

There is a care and delicacy of regular attention given to a vineyard for it to grow. One cannot simply pick the right building, a good spot in town, build a bell tower, have a nice communion table, and call it a church.

There is much more that is required to breathe life into a church community and congregation. You need ministers dedicated to preaching the word of God, administering the sacraments which we will do after worship today, and helping to moderate and guide the church session.

A congregation needs those who are dedicated to the tender care and cultivation of its children and youth. For it is these whom Jesus calls to his side and asks to be let through the crowd. It is these same children who will turn into adults just like us leading the future church.

A congregation needs those who are empathetic to love one another, those who are courageous to go out and speak their faith to others, those who are creative to bring music and art into worship, those who are ready to lead meetings and organize events for the whole church family.

The list goes on and on, and it feels endless some days, but that's the life of tending to a vineyard, that's the life of tending to a living field. And our congregation is no exception. It is a living breathing thing, full of life and love.

And while I do not think that every word of the prophet today is a warning aimed at us specifically, I think that his words are still important for us to listen to today. If we are not doing what we can to support others, If we do not stand up for justice, If we fail show others that through God's grace and the love of Jesus Christ we are living righteously, then we run the risk of producing sour grapes.

I believe that the Spirit is calling us to live into the life that Jesus called us too. I believe that Christ Jesus has given us grace and forgiveness. I believe that God's love fills us and inspires us.

I believe that we can be the vineyard that produces not just good grapes but great grapes. I believe that we are on the right track, and this is clearly evidenced by the 20+ individuals who have stepped up to welcome people in to our cozy corner of kinross that we might serve as a warm hub. I have seen the support that is given to organizations that are doing good things around the world like MAF, I have seen the way your children are inspired to go and serve others even around the world.

But I also know that a church is always growing and changing, and is always in need of those will answer the call of discipleship to lead and to help and to serve the community of God.

So let us take the word from Isaiah to heart today, that while our vineyard has all the marks of success, and has been carefully constructed, we still have work to do, so let's go and do it together.

Amen.