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SERMON: People Who Produce the Fruit of God's Vineyard

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Isaiah 5:1-7, Matthew 21:33-46

We don't know who first discovered wine. Presumably someone had been collecting wild grapes to eat and the grapes were crushed in whatever container they were in and at least some of the juice had enough time to sit and begin to ferment. It took a very long time to move from that kind of accident to intentional cultivation of grape vines and the production of wine. Scholars think that this might have happened around 6000 years ago.

The Bible says that, after the ark came to rest on dry land, one of the first things that Noah did was to plant vineyards, make wine and drink it. The place where the ark came to rest was said to be Mt. Ararat, in Turkey. That is part of the general area where researchers believe wild grape vines evolved in the Near East.

Grapes need a climate that is not too hot and not too cold and not too humid. It can grow in poor soil but not in the desert because it needs a regular supply of sufficient water, about 16 inches a year. Israel and its neighbors contained areas with soil of just the right sort for grapes. There generally was enough water especially with the development of terracing to increase arable land and irrigation systems to get the water to the crops. Farmers learned the importance of pruning and of planting vine cuttings instead of planting seeds and waiting for them to grow.

Much of the wine produced in Israel was sweet, maybe even syrupy. It was mixed with honey, boiled-down grape juice or date syrup. Later it came to be mixed with herbs and spices such as cardamom, wormwood, myrrh or fruit juice like pomegranate. Wine was stored in earthenware containers and may have tasted of the dirt of those containers... hence the need for mixing the wine with other flavors.

This information I am sharing with you comes from Divine Vintage: Following the Wine Trail from Genesis to the Modern Age by Randall Heskett and Joel Butler (Nov 13, 2012). It's an interesting book even if it does interpret everything in the Bible in terms of wine. It's like the old, adage, "To a hammer, everything looks like a nail." To the authors, obviously lovers of wine, everything in the Bible seems to relate to wine and vineyards. However, I do recommend the book for its history of wine and for the story of how various vintners are now trying to reproduce some of the wines that the ancients of the OT would have known and that people in the NT, including Jesus, would have drunk.

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I confess that I was drawn to the book because I grew up in a household and a culture that did not appreciate wine or alcohol in any form. I did not have my first drink until I turned 21. It has been interesting in my adult years to find out that the people in the Bible drank wine because it was hard to find water and difficult to store and transport it without contamination. By Jesus' time especially, wine was abundant, a principal commodity in trade, and available in containers suitable for storage and transport.

In the OT grape vines would have been cultivated to grow alongside grain, olive trees, fruit trees. It was not until Roman times that grape vines would have been grown in the long straight rows, on posts and lines, that we know today. Vineyards were critically important to the families of Israel, tended in turn by succeeding generations. Grain and wine were the essential foods for Israel (Judge 19:19, Prov 9:5, Eccl 9:7, Hos 9:2). It was a source of food for the poor, the widows, the orphans and the sojourners who were permitted to pick behind the grape harvesters (Lev 19:10, Dt 24:21). The vineyard was so central that it became a symbol for the nation of Israel and its people (Hos 10:1, Ps 80:8-11, Isa 5:1-7, Jer 2:2). Christians have adopted the imagery so that Jesus becomes the vine and his followers the branches that bear fruit (John 15:1-6).

Vineyards needed to be protected so they would have been surrounded by hedges. Remember that there was no such thing as a local police force. Such police forces only came into existence within the last 250 years ... in 1791 in British India and in 1829 in Great Britain itself. Boston had the first such force in the U. S. in 1838. Other cities have followed since. But there would have been no such police force in the time of Isaiah or Jesus.

So, in the vineyard, there would have been a booth or watchtower built so that the vineyard could be watched by the tenants and protected from marauding animals or people. They would have required a lot of labor to establish, to prune, to hoe. When harvest time came, there would be a short window of time in which many people would be required for the picking and for the trampling of the grapes and for the preparation of the wine.

And yet, vineyards might fail. The vines and grapes might be infected with disease. The vineyard might be raided or destroyed by marauding bandits or armies. Or, as Isaiah noted, the vineyard might yield a harvest of wild grapes that could not generate the wine for which the vineyard had been purposed.

The prophet Isaiah blamed the people of Israel for a bad harvest, not of wine but of the fruits God had chosen them to produce. They were supposed to practice justice and live righteously, but they had not. Instead, violence was rampant and oppression was the rule.

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Jesus in his time did not blame the people. He accused the tenants of the vineyard, i.e., the leadership in the Temple of Jerusalem of yielding a bad harvest.

Indeed, Jesus used the story of the vineyard to review the entire history of the Jewish leadership. The servants sent by the landowner represent the OT prophets sent by God to collect the spiritual fruit of his people. However, they were beaten, rejected and killed by Israel's corrupt rulers.

The sending of the son in the parable represents Jesus' own public ministry. The leadership knew exactly who the son, Jesus, is. They plotted to get the Romans to kill him because they wanted to maintain control over God's land.

Jesus dramatically cleansed the Temple, driving out the moneychangers, because they had corrupted true worship and turned the Temple into a social, political, and financial stronghold for the religious leadership. God was not in charge, they were. They plotted to kill Jesus to protect the status quo against Roman intervention and thereby protect their own autonomy.

Jesus asked the leadership, those listening to the parable, what the landowner in the parable would likely do after the tenants killed God's prophets and God's Son. They unwittingly pronounced judgment upon themselves: He will bring, they said, those wretches to a miserable end and rent the vineyard to others who will produce the fruit God seeks at harvest time.

The others to whom Jesus referred are not Gentiles who replace the chosen people in the old covenant with God. Rather, the others are a brand-new community of the faithful led by the twelve apostles, the faithful including both Jews and Gentiles, who will actually bear the fruit of the Kingdom.

Jesus concludes by quoting Psalm 118:22-23: "The stone the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone." The "builders" are the elite architects of Jerusalem's religion, the leadership in the Temple. The "rejected stone" is Jesus, whom God will vindicate through the resurrection, laying him down as the foundation for a completely new community in the new temple who is our Savior, Jesus the Christ.

What are the fruits that God seeks? What are the fruits that were expected of Temple leadership and that they failed to deliver? Justice and righteousness.

To explore the fullness of what justice and righteousness means would require an entire sermon or indeed a series of sermons. Stay tuned for that!

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For today let me just say a few words on the topic as I conclude this sermon. In the OT justice and righteousness meant right relationship with God and with others. We know we are in right relationship if we adhere to God's commandments, 613 of them in the OT as counted by the Jewish rabbis ... 365 "dos" and 248 "do not's". Unfortunately, that approach fostered a kind of legalistic interpretation that sometimes led the leadership and the faithful astray. They got hung up on detail and sometimes missed the larger point of behaving towards others as God had behaved towards his chosen people, i.e., with steadfast love and mercy and opportunities for repentance and forgiveness.

This point is made by Jesus and the NT authors by focusing on the radical nature of God's love. We are not only to love God and neighbor but even our enemies. We are to work for social systems that offer opportunities for communities at the margin to change and improve their circumstances. That means not just economic improvement but improvement in every sense in which human life can be improved ... the ability to redress grievances, access to social and political power, access to education and information needed for a better life, and so on.

Think about Christian justice as the antithesis of the way Roman justice worked. Roman society was based on lineage, who your parents and grandparents and so on were, how much money you had, how much land you had, how much power you had. When you went to court those things were at least as important as whether charges against you or charges you brought against others were based on solid evidence. A powerful Roman could win in the courts simply, on the basis of his family name and his status in Roman society. That is why the Bible advised Christians in those times to stay out of Roman courts.

And it was that Roman social order that the Temple leadership had bought into. They enjoyed their status and wanted to keep it. They were more concerned with that than with being instruments of God's justice, mercy, and righteousness.

Instead, justice for Christians would be based on love for others and on what is good for others. Their status, our status, matters not. We should seek to avoid litigation, if at all possible, settling our difficulties peacefully and cooperatively and with the good of the other always at the forefront.

If we find ourselves in court despite efforts to avoid that, then justice would be rendered if the court treats everyone the same under the law with no regard for social status, wealth, power, etc. A just court would make its decisions on the basis of solid evidence, including witness testimony from a minimum of two people ... not just one ... as to the facts of the charges.

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Justice, mercy, righteousness ... all are to be found if we are right relationship, that is, loving relationship with God and with God's creatures. That love characterizes the Kingdom of God. That is the fruit of the vineyard that God seeks. That is the fruit that we should seek to produce.

Amen.