**A Tale of Three Vineyards**

Isaiah 5:1-7; Psalm 80:7-15 Matthew 21:33-46

Suggested Hymn of the Day: *Jesus Loves Me!* ELW 595

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When Katrina and I first announced we were going to have a baby in the summer of 2019, we heard over and over again people telling us, “just you wait!” “Just you wait” to experience labor. “Just you wait” for those sleepless nights. “Just you wait,” she’ll be crawling and walking soon! As our children have grown, we hear that same refrain at each major milestone. She’s crawling? “Just you wait” until she starts walking. He’s eating solid foods? “Just you wait” for him to start feeding himself. They’re asserting their independent personalities? “Just you wait,” they’ll be teenagers soon!

So it shouldn’t be a surprise to me that parenting young children is an exercise in celebrating many developmental milestones while also preparing for the next one. Ariella pooped on the potty! Time to start being more intentional about potty training. Nathanael started crawling! We should start being more vigilant about closing doors, using baby gates, and keeping outlet covers plugged in.

I’m sure you can hear the joy and pride that these milestones bring to a proud daddy like me. I am constantly amazed at how much my babies are growing up. But that joy and pride is also mixed up with the emotions of the “just you wait” stories we’ve been told.

Ariella is headstrong. If she’s anything like her father these qualities may get her into trouble as she’s growing up. She is a quick learner. This already brings concerns about how quickly children outgrow innocence. She loves interacting with anyone who’s near enough to pay her attention. We will have to teach her good manners and healthy boundaries.

Nathanael is such a sweet boy. He is gentle, caring, and very concerned about everyone else being happy. He’s a lot like his mother in that way. Being sensitive can lead to uncertainty and heartbreak. Sometimes even codependence in relationships. While his sister will have no trouble asserting her needs, it will be difficult for my soft-hearted son to speak up for his needs. We will have to teach him to own the space he occupies.

Wrapped up with every good and amazing trait our children are displaying is a flip side that makes that trait concerning for their loving, doting parents who want to raise them to be as healthy and happy as they can be.

Wrapped up with every good quality that humans display is a flip side that, when left unchecked, causes harm and worry to our creator. This reality is present in the vineyard readings we hear this morning.

In Isaiah, we hear God’s lament. Isaiah proclaims God’s heartbrokenness that the people of Israel, children God raised through the lineage of Abraham, people that God provided freedom and land for, have gone seemingly wild. Where God thought the cultivation of relationship through Torah and stories of divine intervention would create children who trust their heavenly father, the Israelites have rebelled. God hoped for good fruit after generations of cultivation. Good fruit from this vineyard would bear justice in the world. Good fruit would serve as a conduit for God’s love. Good fruit would be step-in-step walking with God through every part of life. Instead of bearing good fruit, the people returned wild fruit brambled with individual sin, social injustice, ignorance of God and God’s ways, pain, war, and hate for others not like them.

Isaiah’s proclamation is one not of anger and spite. Rather it is the proclamation of a forlorn parent who gave their child every opportunity they could to succeed. A parent who is watching that child squander those opportunities and following a path of destruction. A parent who can’t see a way forward except to take away the gifts given in hope for responsible use. God, conveyed through Isaiah, is out of second chances and ready to move on.

In Jesus’ parable, similar imagery produces the same theme. God has entrusted much to the leaders of the temple, but the leaders plot to keep the glory due God for themselves. Even the appearance of the son cannot persuade them to act differently! Jesus tells the priests and Pharisees that “the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom.” That is, the grapes that have dried on the vine will be replaced with new crops that will not wither, but respond to good cultivation. The gifts that were given and squandered will be taken away and given to another who will use them for good.

The concept given here isn’t difficult to grasp. We all know actions have consequences. According to Matthew, the Pharisees, chief priests, elders, scribes, and Sadducees deserved their judgment. The Israel Isaiah knew had fallen from knowing its place in the world as God’s chosen people. People we disagree with today in politics, theology, and ideology deserve the bad things that happen to them.

How do we respond when consequences are imposed on us? What happens when we have the sudden realization that Isaiah and Jesus are also talking about us? How do we react when we realize that despite our best efforts, we bear wild fruit, deny God what God is due, pound the nails and drive the spear into the son sent to change us? Where do we go when we complete our harvest and see that all we’ve brought in are wild grapes?

We can certainly be like the chief priests and Pharisees, moved by rage to desire killing the one who challenges us to see our wild fruit. We can also be like the Israelites, who fought tooth and nail to stay on their trajectory, even as it carried them into the hands of the Babylonians who brough cultural and religious destruction.

Or, borrowing from another well-loved parable, we can be like the prodigal son. We can see the reality of who we are and what we have become and turn back to our divine parent with true repentance and hope. We can join the Psalmist, who calls God to restore, save, look down with favor, and have regard for those who have seen their wrongs.

With God, judgement is never the final answer. God may allow the consequences of our actions to play out- that’s part of the gift of free will- but God will always respond to God’s children with love. God will always provides us with what we need, even when we do not deserve it. God, like many parents through the history of time is heartbroken by children’s rebellion, but ready to respond with love and grace upon the child’s return.

I know that there will be many “just you wait” moments as Ariella and Nathanael grow up. The first time one of them expresses their anger with me by telling me they hate me. When one or both of them blatantly disregard a rule that Katrina and I set for their safety. A lie meant to cover something done with full knowledge that the action and the lie are both wrong. The continued assertion of self that are part of the development of all children, teenagers, and young adults. I know that the love I hold for my children will lead to heartbreak and tears, and in my sinful moments, anger and revenge.

But I also know that no matter what Ariella and Nathanael do, no matter how many times they break my heart, no matter how much I may wish circumstances were different, I will never stop loving them. I will never stop trying to guide them and teach them and make their way easier. I will always be available for reconciliation, and in my best moments will ask the forgiveness I need for my shortfalls.

If I, in my human brokenness, can say this with all certainty, how much more can God, in God’s perfection promise continued love and grace? (Luke 11:9-13) How deeply can we rely on God to produce good fruit through us, even though we know we are the workers who killed God’s son, even though we allow wild fruit to grow within us? How does this knowledge lead us to cry out for restoration in spirit, mind, and body?

How will you tend your vineyard, knowing that God’s love is available and freely given to you?

Amen.