

**Sermon Proper 22 Year A 2023 (Readings: Isaiah 5: 1-7; Psalm 19;  
Philippians 3: 4b-14; Matthew 21: 33-46)**

**The Vineyard, Paul, and Humility**

*“God the Father, the Son, Holy Spirit: Open us to Your Presence, Amen.”*

The title of this sermon today is “The Vineyard, Paul, and Humility.” A mouthful for sure, but let’s take a journey and try to put it all together. Perhaps you can keep these words from the prophet Micah in mind: “... do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God.”

The Hebrew Bible reading from Isaiah today is an allegory or parable, meaning that people and objects within the story are symbolic of people and objects outside the story. The reader or listener is encouraged to see themselves or others as they read or hear the story. It is called the “Song of the Vineyard,” and it is a love song. It is an allegory of a romance between a lover—God—and God’s beloved—the people. From verse 1, “Let me sing for my beloved my love-song concerning his vineyard.” It brings to mind the Song of Songs, also known as The Song of Solomon, interpreted by many as another love story between God and God’s people, God’s creation. In this song in Isaiah God has created a perfect garden, a vineyard on a fertile hill, has dug it and cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines. “What more was there to do for my vineyard that I have not done in it?” God expected the people to care for it and tend to it so that it would produce grapes. Yet it has not. Instead, in the hands of the people it has produced only wild grapes, sour grapes, unsuitable for wine, useless except for perhaps scavenger birds, nothing more than a rotting mess. God here is a jilted lover who feels the pain of betrayal. The people have rejected God, have broken their covenant, have not lived up to their call. And what was it that God asked of them? In verse seven: “God expected justice, but saw bloodshed; righteousness, but heard a cry.” The fruit of the vineyard, the grapes, was to be right relationship between the people and one another, between the people and creation, between the people and God. And they failed.

What was the consequence? “I will remove its hedge, and it shall be devoured; I will break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down. I will make it a waste: it shall not be pruned or hoed, and it shall be overgrown with briars and thorns; I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it.” The consequence is that we will have our own way and be left with our own devices. We will not live in a world where we “do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God,” a world where we in right relationship with God, with one another, and with all of creation. This poignant text imagines God in more personal terms than many of us are used to. It prompts us to consider how God has cared for us and whether we are truly bearing the fruits of justice and right relationship. Serious questions, with serious consequences, but the text does not let us forget that we are still characters in this divine love song.

Matthew picks up on this allegory of the vineyard in Jesus’ parable today. Clearly the author of Matthew had the song in Isaiah in mind when he wrote this text. It is the second in a series of three parables that Jesus tells in the Temple, following his triumphal entrance into Jerusalem, and his cleansing of the Temple when, evoking the ire and hatred of the religious leaders, he overturns the tables of the money changers and chases them out. The parables are addressed not to all the Jewish people, but to the Jewish religious leaders of the Temple. The members of the religious establishment are the tenant farmers here, and they like the people in Isaiah’s song have rejected God’s call for justice and right relationship. They too will pay the price for their actions. They too will suffer the consequences. Jesus tells them, “Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruit of the kingdom.”

Now let’s move to Paul, and explore what he might have to do with these vineyard stories. It has something to do with humility, and its opposite hubris or pride. There was a time when I didn’t like Paul much, years ago back before I knew much about him. I thought then that he was prideful and arrogant. But I

have to give him credit. He was instrumental in the development of the faith, of building the inclusive body of Christ, and his ideas and teachings affected the beliefs of Christians for all time. After the death of Jesus, and following his encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus, he became, in his own words, “an apostle of Christ”, taking his message of Christ to the gentiles throughout the Mediterranean. We have very little historical information about what happened during this time, but one perspective is this: There were two understandings that were developing about Jesus at that time. First there was that of the historical human Jesus, known by the apostles and disciples who lived with him and knew him in Palestine. And second, that of the post-Easter divine Jesus, resurrected and still alive following his crucifixion. Paul’s theology was the Hellenistic or Greek thinking based on the resurrected divine Jesus, often at odds with the Hebrew understanding of Jesus the man known best by Peter, John, and Jesus’ brother James. Paul’s relationship with them was contentious. Their primary focus of worship remained Jerusalem and the Temple. Jesus was the Messiah, the Jewish teacher and revolutionary who was sent to redeem Israel, just as they interpreted their scriptures to predict. But they knew him first hand, as the human being he was. Paul says very little about Jesus the man. He carried his message of the resurrected Jesus the Christ, fully divine, throughout the Mediterranean, establishing churches in places like Philippi, Corinth, Ephesus, Galatia, and others. When the Temple was destroyed by the Romans in 70 CE, the Hebrew place of worship was gone. The voices of James and Peter became muted. Paul became the voice for the evolving church. For some reason I often think of him as a short little man with no redeeming physical features, perhaps because others have—without good evidence—described him as such. But according to Luke’s account in Acts Paul made three missionary trips throughout the Mediterranean, for the most part walking mind you, for a total of 6,900 miles! That’s the equivalent of traveling mostly on foot from New York City to Los Angeles and then back, and then

turning around and walking to Denver! He must have been incredibly energetic and physically capable. He faced all kinds of trouble on these journeys— exposure to the cold, beatings with rods, lashings, stoning, imprisonment, and according to church tradition execution in Rome by beheading during the reign of Emperor Nero. The letters he wrote, all of which precede any of the gospels, form much of the theology of Christianity. While the synoptic gospels Mark, Matthew, and Luke focus more on the life of Jesus as a man, the gospel of John is for the most part the same Hellenistic theology that Paul developed.

I want to focus today on Paul's letter to the Philippians, in part because of its emphasis on the theme of this sermon, that is humility. He wrote it in 50 or 51 CE, during his second missionary trip, less than twenty years after the death of Jesus. He was somewhere in prison when he wrote it. It is a friendship kind of letter, giving his friends an update about his current condition in prison, to ease their minds, and to give thanks for the support they had given him. It is also a call to unity of the body of Christ, and for people to take on the mind of Christ, stressing his humility. In the letter he recites what is called the Christ Hymn, which is one of the earliest writings about the nature of Christ. It was written or sung regularly in Christian liturgy, in baptisms and other celebrations. Although Paul probably didn't write the hymn, he used it to make a point. It serves Paul's exhortation to humility by grounding it in Christ's having humbled himself, followed by his exhalation: "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus ...who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself ...and being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross. Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name." Humility here refers to putting others first and consciously seeking what is best for others, rather than what is best for one's self. C.S. Lewis puts it simply: "Humility is not thinking less of oneself. It is thinking of oneself less." It is closely related to love. The hymn reminds his

readers, and us today, that the best all-time example of humility is Christ himself, the ultimate model for putting the interest of others first. It also goes on to say that those who humble themselves, like Christ, will be exalted.

The word “kenosis” means self-emptying, and it has a lot to do with humility. God emptied God’s self into creation in the very beginning. It was and is an act of love as God created then and continues to create all that is, this beautiful vineyard of creation, including us. All of God’s acts, blessings, and delights in creating are for others. In the Hebrew Scriptures this is typical of God, whose concern is with justice, peace, and the flourishing of all creatures; God who is “on high” but never remote, who is “over all” but intimately invested in life on earth. We are the recipients of this kenosis, and we are called to empty ourselves as well. St. Paul himself, imprisoned and possibly facing death, continued to empty himself into the lives of the people he encountered.

So how do we connect Paul and his call for humility to the allegories of the Vineyard? It seems that it is often hubris, not humility, that motivates so many of our actions. The thinking that we are somehow better than our neighbors, and somehow above and superior to the rest of the created order. In Isaiah’s song God is asking for justice and right relationship, including right relationship with creation itself, his Vineyard we are called to protect. It is the same vineyard that we heard about today in our Psalm: “The heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament shows his handiwork.” I won’t get into this too much today, but how are we doing with this call? Not so well. We as a people have abused our home Earth, have failed in our calling to be its stewards, and we like the people Isaiah is addressing are seeing and will see more of the consequences of our actions. And how often do we like the religious leaders Jesus is addressing in his parable try to our peril to hold on to our success, our prestige, our power and our status at the expense of those without? Too often, I would say, and that goes for me too. But here is the hope. In his letter today Paul himself, authentically I think, and with vulnerability,

describes his journey like this, “Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.” In other words, “keep on keepin’ on” to, as Micah says “Do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God.”

Rev. Bob Donnell