

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost
Grace Church of West Feliciana Parish,
St. Francisville, LA
14 August 2016

Isaiah 5:1-7

This beautiful poem from Isaiah strikes close to home for me. You see, I am the son of a South American coffee grower and I remember my dad choosing his most fertile hills in his farm, paying top dollar for the right kinds of seeds, hoping to raise high quality coffee to benefit from the rising prices of the country's thriving exportation business. Every year he cleared the land around the coffee plants, spending a great deal of money in labor to ensure the ground was clear and ready for fertilizing. He incurred great expenses that went above and beyond land clearing and re-planting young plants to replace those he had to cut down every year. There were costs associated with fuel, seed, fertilizers, chemicals, labor, monitoring, harvesting and utilities. Not to mention fixed costs, such as equipment payments and salaries for his workers. Nonetheless, my father loved his farm and could not wait for harvest time.

When harvest season arrived, my father and his workers would labor from sun up to sun down for the entire three month season. Yet, there were many years when my father was greatly saddened by the quality of the coffee. Despite all his love and care the harvest yield was very poor. Apparently, many of his coffee plants were often attacked by a particular type of mold that affected production. "La Roya" killed many plants and the quality of the coffee that survived was very poor. No matter what remedy my father tried, the harvest often could not be salvaged and, as a result the yield was highly unstable year after year. Despite his heartache, my father died a coffee grower, refusing to consider how unstable the market was and how difficult it was to compete with the great industrialized producers in the region. Year after year the result was the same, but year after year there was hope that next year would be better. It was only after my father died that our family decided to uproot every coffee plant in the farm and to switch to cattle farming with much better results.

This story aptly illustrates the parable of the vineyard used by Isaiah today. God has chosen Israel to be God's nation and God's people. God had planted the nation in a fertile hill, had rescued it from enemies, had delivered it from the hands of Egypt, had walked with them for forty years in the desert, had sent them the best caregivers, had given them the Law, had helped develop them into a powerful kingdom, and had given them great success in their religious and

political affairs. Yet, despite this great love and care, the nation of Israel had produced a worthless harvest. While a crop of delicious grapes had been expected, the nation produced worthless sour grapes, good for nothing. Their national and personal behavior amounted to nothing but worthless fruit.

Whereas God expected loyalty, the nation delighted in idolatry to a variety of man-made images. Whereas God expected them to show great mercy and compassion to the widows, the poor, the orphans and the stranger, the nation had fallen into great injustice, especially against the poorest of the poor. Whereas God expected the nation to be Law-abiding, they were engaging in all sorts of sexual improprieties, religious offenses, and political disobedience. From the highest strata of society to the lowest, Israel had walked away from their God and had forgotten all that God had done for them. God exclaims today with great sadness, "What more was there to do for my Vineyard that I have not done in it?" God had sent them liberators like Moses; mighty judges like Samson, Deborah, and Samuel; great kings like David; prophetic voices like Amos, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and others. What else could God have done? Like my father growing worthless coffee, God would be justified if he burnt all his vineyards and abandoned his hill. Like Oklahoma, Texas and Kansas in the 1930's, God's nation had become a worthless "Dust Bowl".

"Within the context of Isaiah, one can easily discern the types of injustices that Judah perpetrated: they do not defend the cause of the widow and orphan (1:23), they coveted and stored up wealth for themselves (1:29), they oppressed the poor (3:14-15), they acquitted the guilty and deprived the innocent of their rights (5:23)" (Working Preacher, Commentary on Isaiah 5:1-7). Israel which had been the "vineyard of the LORD of hosts... God's pleasant planting" did not produce God's expected harvest of justice, but rather it produced bloodshed. It did not produce righteousness, but rather it produced plenty of cries, as the poor and the oppressed cried out to God, "How Long, Oh God, How Long?" It is ironic that it was the nation's cries the Lord hears in Exodus 3 when the nation is being oppressed by Pharaoh in Egypt. God tells Moses, "I have heard the cry of my people". Centuries later, it is the nation itself that is oppressing the poor and the weakest among them. The nation has transformed itself into a perpetrator of injustice, forgetting that they had been the victims of injustice in Egypt. They have become the oppressor and now God is hearing the cries of the oppressed.

Today, Isaiah reminds his nation that God will not withstand injustice forever. God will not withstand our apathy to the sufferings of others for ever. God will not permit the status quo forever. This is in fact what happens a few years later when the entire nation is exiled in Babylon. Suddenly they are forced to face their own

depravity and in the desolation of Babylon they are able to confess their sin and repent for the iniquities. God has the power to break into human history to upset that status quo. This is what God in fact does many centuries later.

Fortunately for us Christians God answered his own question. “What more was there to do for the vineyard?” In the fullness of time God found the answer to this question by sending Jesus Christ to us. Christ came to disrupt the status quo, to call the nation back to God; to remind them and us of our original vocation, which was and is to be a blessing to the nations; to unsettle the minds; to produce restlessness in the human heart; to inspire a new type of obedience based no longer on adherence to the law, but based on a personal relationship with a personal God; to establish a new ethic, a new way of being, and a new reason for hope and for joy.

Today both Isaiah and Luke remind us that we must become the people we were created by God to be. Jesus says today “I came to bring fire on the earth and how I wish it were already kindled!” To be a nation after God’s own heart demands that we choose to be on fire. To be on fire for Christ demands that we realize that every commitment we make affects all areas of our life; that we risk being persecuted; that we commit to changing our attitude towards material possessions; and that we accept freely certain moral responsibilities that come with being a disciple of Christ. Accepting Christ also demands that we be willing to sacrifice our relationships with others. “Because our commitment to Christ shapes our values, priorities, goals, and behavior, it also forces us to change old patterns of life, and these changes may precipitate crises in significant relationships.” (Culpepper, “*Luke*”. New Interpreters Bible, 267).

The biggest charge someone can levy at Christians is not that we don’t love God or Christ. It is that we lack passion. To be committed to Christ demands that we be on fire, that we be passionate about God’s kingdom, that we lead lives focused and centered on Christ. And that we be willing to engage life as active participants and not as expectations.

I pray today that all of us choose to jump into the fire. That we all choose to follow Jesus Christ in a way that will fill our lives with passion and commitment to love others, to seek justice, and to accept the challenge to live and to dance by the sound of a different drum. The name of that drum is “Jesus of Nazareth.” May he continue to bless you. Amen!