

Yielding Wild Grapes

August 14, 2022

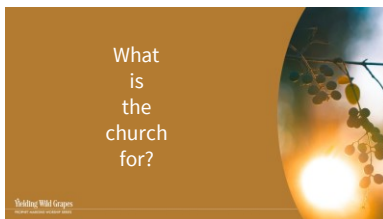
Isaiah 5:1-7

¹ *I will sing for my beloved my love song concerning his vineyard: my beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. ² He dug it and cleared it of stones and planted it with choice vines; he built a watchtower in the midst of it and hewed out a wine vat in it; he expected it to yield grapes, but it yielded rotten grapes.*

³ *And now, inhabitants of Jerusalem and people of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard. ⁴ What more was there to do for my vineyard that I have not done in it? When I expected it to yield grapes, why did it yield rotten grapes?*

⁵ *And now I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard. I will remove its hedge, and it shall be devoured; I will break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down. ⁶ I will make it a wasteland; 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.*

⁷ *For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts is the house of Israel, and the people of Judah are his cherished garden; he expected justice but saw bloodshed; righteousness but heard a cry!*



We begin today with a discussion. I ask: What is the church for?...

There are many answers to this question. As you can see from the answers on the white board, some answers focus inward and some focus outward. To me, there must be a balance of these two views, of these competing interests. Temples, churches, mosques, and other places of worship have existed for thousands of years. One of their primary purposes has always been to gather the people to worship and to grow in their faith. Another primary purpose of these places of worship has been to equip the people to go out and practice the things that they learned. This teaching and equipping were designed to lead the people outside the walls of the building and into the neighborhoods and communities in which they lived. Outside the walls, we are called to positively impact others through acts of piety and acts of mercy – “loving neighbor as ourselves” in Jesus-speak. This is what we talked about last week, when we heard the call to do good, to seek justice, to rescue the oppressed, to defend the orphan, and to plead for the widow. Religion, no matter the flavor, has always sought to maintain a balance of caring for the members of the flock and of caring for those outside the flock. As we prepare for this time together, let us begin with a prayer...



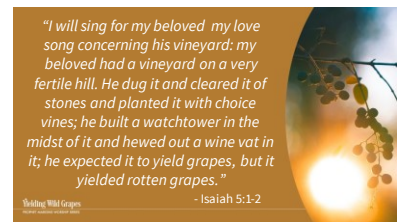
In today's passage from Isaiah 5, God speaks of a vineyard. Vineyards can be beautiful and exquisitely cared for places. They are usually found in idyllic settings. But even the one

found along the interstate just south of Piedmont is beautiful and calls one to walk amongst its vines and leaves. In Biblical times, vineyards were prized possessions. The goal of a vineyard, of course, is to produce round, sweet, flavorful fruit. But very quickly things can go south. The result is wild or sour grapes. Now, just in case you've never had one, let me share that it takes a great deal of effort to care for a vineyard. At our last home in Rapid City, I planted seven grape vines.

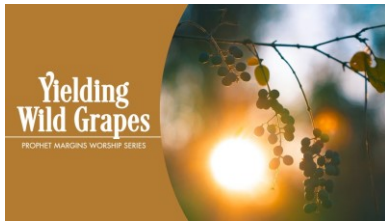
Many times it seemed like the growth exploded overnight. What had been somewhat neat and tidy one day looked like an explosion of foliage and vines just a couple of days later. You see, vines require constant training and pruning to produce a good crop of grapes. One has to be meticulous and detailed in how one cares for a vineyard.

In our passage today, the vineyard represents Israel. If you are not already there, turn with me to Isaiah 5. Israel saw itself as the vineyard of God. Years later, the church would see itself as the new vineyard of God. In today's passage Isaiah is asking the people then and us today if we sometimes lose focus or perspective when it comes to the church, to God's vineyard. Isaiah 5 begins with these

words: *"I will sing for my beloved my love song concerning his vineyard: my beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. He dug it and cleared it of stones and planted it with choice*



vines; he built a watchtower in the midst of it and hewed out a wine vat in it; he expected it to yield grapes, but it yielded rotten grapes." This is a love song of sorts, just with a sad ending. The song begins well – God starts a vineyard on a fertile hill. The stones were cleared, and God planted choice vines. There was good soil that the chosen people of God were rooted in. God built a watchtower and a wine vat. Jerusalem sat strong atop the hills and within the city was a beautiful temple, built to house the faith of the people. These words could be sung about many churches that have been raised up over the centuries. But then things went south in Jerusalem. The temple began to yield rotten grapes, bitter grapes, wild grapes.

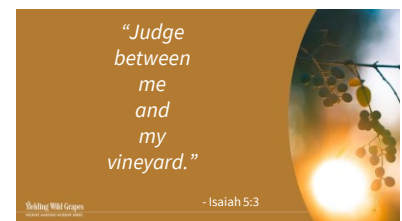


Here God speaks of wild grapes. There is no reason, at least from God's perspective, for the grapes to go wild. They've been given the best environment, they've been watered and cared for, they've been gently tended by loving hands and hearts. Yet, the fruit is sour, wild, rotten. Jesus himself will pick up this theme as he makes one last trip into Jerusalem. This parable appears in two of the gospels.

In Matthew 24 and Mark 11 Jesus sees a fig tree as he approaches Jerusalem. Anticipating a sweet snack as he nears the tree, Jesus realizes that the tree is barren. He curses the tree and soon it withers and dies. The implied meaning matches what God is saying about the Israelites during Isaiah's day – their faith is dry and barren. It will wither and die. Jesus also shares a connected and contrasting parable in Luke 13, where the vineyard owner wants to cut down the unproductive fig tree. It has been three years since the tree was planted. The gardener asks for patience, believing that with one more year of care, the tree will produce good fruit. Here Jesus is implying that there is always hope. This too is the case in our passage from Isaiah 5.

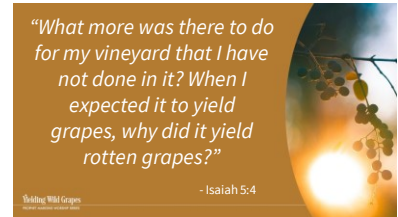
Picking up again in verse 3, God invites the people of Jerusalem and Judah to *"judge between me and my vineyard."* God is asking the people to reflect and to

consider if the faith of the people mirrors the character of God. God is asking if the body of believers looks and acts like God. God is not asking them if they are omnipotent and perfect and everlasting, like God is. No, God does not expect them to have a totally divine nature. Instead God is asking them about God's "human nature", so to speak. God is asking them if they are reflecting God's love and care.



God asks if they are living out compassion and steadfastness. God is asking them if they are practicing the things that the leaders preach and the people learn about from the scriptures and from the priests in the temple.

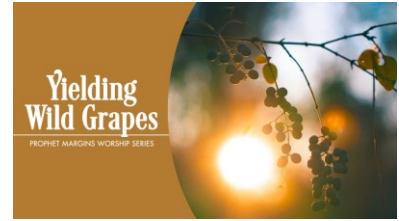
It is a somewhat rhetorical question. Continuing in verse 4, God answers for the people. Here God does so with two questions, asking, *“What more was there to do for my*



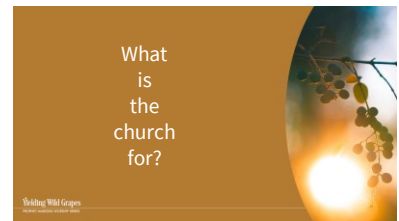
vineyard that I have not done in it? When I expected it to yield grapes, why did it yield rotten grapes?” Again, God is reminding the people that God did all that God could do. The people had a choice to make in this scenario and they did not choose wisely. It is the choice presented at the end of last week’s Isaiah 1 passage. Choose God and find life. Choose the world and find death. Instead of choosing God, they chose self. They chose their own comfort and ease over the needs of many around them. They chose to retreat inside the walls of the temple instead of getting out into the streets. And as was the case last week in Isaiah’s prophecy and in the prophecies of Amos and Hosea, the results will not be good for the people of Israel.

Turning to verses 5 and 6 we see the results of the people’s disobedience, in vineyard terms, translated to real events. This is God’s response to these two rhetorical questions. God will remove the hedge of protection from Israel. The walls will be broken down. The city and the temple will be trampled under Assyrian boots. Israel will become a wasteland, barren and dry. Those left behind during the period in exile will struggle to survive. It is not a pretty picture that God paints here.

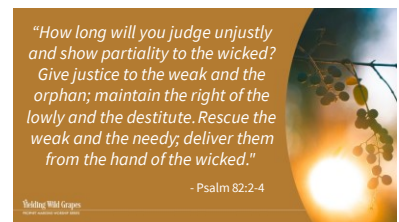
Our passage closes with God driving home the point once again. Here God reminds them of what they should be and of what they instead became. God reminds them that instead of being good fruit in a blessed land they have become wild grapes among the thorns of the world. In verse 7 we read how God *“expected justice but saw bloodshed; righteousness but heard a cry!”* Instead of acting justly they have taken advantage of and oppressed those on the fringes of society, shedding blood instead of offering caring hands. Instead of living righteous lives, they have stolen from their brothers and sisters, raising up cries for help and compassion.



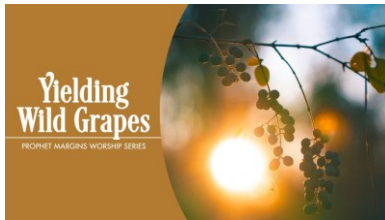
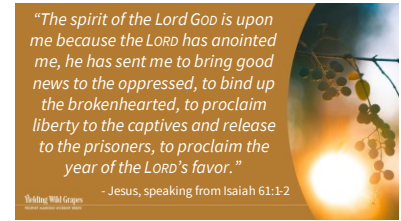
Here we return to the question that we began this time with: What is the church for? While we will not take time right now to again answer these questions collectively, I do want to provide just a second for you to consider your answer and others' answers to this question.



Turning to Psalm 82, one of our other lectionary readings for the week, we get one of God's answers to the question. In verses 2 through 4 we read, *“How long will you judge unjustly and show partiality to the wicked? Give justice to the weak and the orphan; maintain the right of the lowly and the destitute. Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked.”* These words speak to the heart of God. These words were also echoed by Jesus as he began his ministry, reading from Isaiah 61 in the temple.



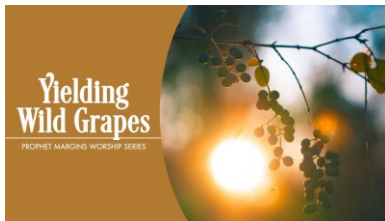
As his ministry was just starting, Jesus proclaimed his mission to be this: *“The spirit of the Lord God is upon me because the LORD has anointed me, he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the LORD’s favor.”* These words speak of both the heart of God and of the heart of Jesus. These words are part of the answer to the question: What is the church for?



Returning once again to verse 3 of our Isaiah 5 passage for today, let us hear this task as a personal moment of reflection now: *“judge between me and my vineyard.”* How does your life and witness, how does my life and witness, how does our church’s life and witness reflect God and God’s character? And in terms of reflecting Jesus, how do you and I bring good news to the oppressed? How do you and I bind up the brokenhearted? How do you and I proclaim liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners? How do you and I proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor? Our answers to these questions are a big part of our answer to the question about the purpose of the church. Again, reiterating what I said last week, the good news is for all people. Christ offers healing and redemption and abundant life to all people.

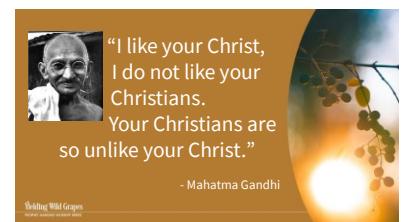
Today our buildings are our vineyards. Theologian Leonard Stewart once said the church has an “edifice complex.” Yes, we do love our buildings. And, to a degree, rightly so. Lots of awesome work for and by God happens within these walls and within the walls of all churches. We love our churches and we spend lots of time here.

Yet Stewart also urges and challenges us and all churches to move beyond the building towards a focus on being the presence of God at work in the world. We are the presence of God at work in the world when we are living out our faith as described by Jesus as he quoted from Isaiah 61.

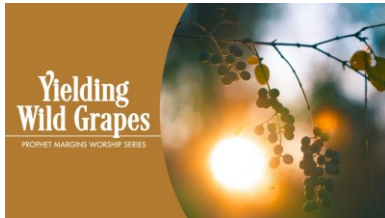


Our world is struggling with wild grapes, with sour fruit. Our world is wrought with issues of deep oppression, with massive healthcare needs, with powerful limitations and barriers imposed by racism and prejudice and discrimination, just to name a few of our issues. At the root of many of these issues is people who are being consumed by a desire for power, for control, for possessions, and for wealth. When much of our society pursues all for the glorification of self, we as a people will yield wild grapes. We, as the people of God, are a minority in this world. We, as the people of God, are called to live on the margins of society.

We are called there for a reason. We, as the people of God, have the power to change the world, to transform the world one life and one system at a time. While it often feels like an uphill battle, the power of Christ in us can still do mighty things in this world and in our lives. We will find resistance. Mahatma Gandhi once said, "I like your Christ, I do not like your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike your Christ." This sentiment came from a man that read the Sermon on the Mount every single morning. This sentiment also reflects the feeling of many people in our world. For too long the world has seen a church that lives within closed walls and lob judgment bombs every once in a while. Well, maybe more than every once in a while.



The church has not always been a good witness to Jesus Christ. My friends, this remains a struggle today. And, my friends, we can change this perception. We can choose to live a different reality.



As we close, our question is this: how do we stop yielding wild and sour and bitter grapes? I believe that God desires for us to produce something different. I believe that God desires for us to be all the things that are good and right and holy about God and about Jesus. I believe that God desires to cultivate our faith, to guide us by the word and example of Jesus found in the Bible, and to use the Holy Spirit to tend to our souls. Equipped, empowered, and assured of God's presence with us, we can go forth into the world to combat evil, to meet needs, and to stand for justice and righteousness. This was the heart of Jesus' ministry to the world. May it be the heart of our ministry to the world. My friends, may it be so. Amen and amen.

GPS – Grow, Pray, Study

- 1) *Grow*. What places of evil, what areas of need, what spaces of injustice exist in the world around you? How can you reflect Christ in addressing some of this?
- 2) *Pray*. How have you experienced God at work in your life or in the life of someone you know recently? Offer a prayer of thanks and a prayer for God to continue to be at work.
- 3) *Study*. Read Luke 4:14-21. How might the Spirit of the Lord be upon you? How did Jesus fulfill these words of Isaiah? How might this be your example?