



“A Not So Friendly Reminder”

Isaiah 5:1-7; Luke 12:49-56

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The Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost

“Our God is too nice.” At least, this is what the cover of the recent issue of the magazine *Christian Century* says...“Our God is too nice.” Well, after hearing today’s Lectionary readings, we might draw a different conclusion.

If I had to sum up our Lectionary readings into a single word, it would be “challenging.” Others have used far less diplomatic words...especially about the first reading from Isaiah. One commentary that I read described our reading from Isaiah as “chilling.”

For those of us who expect to see uplifting and positive messages in the Lectionary readings...not to mention from Scripture generally...these two texts are indeed “challenging.” Let’s start with Isaiah.

Commentators pretty unanimously speak of this passage as being among the most clever literary pieces in all of the Old Testament. It is widely known as “The Vineyard Song.”

A little background on Isaiah should be helpful. Scholars break the Book of Isaiah into three parts, composed at different times by three different writers. Simplistically, “First Isaiah,” or Chapters 1-39, was written by so-called “Isaiah of Jerusalem”...really the original Isaiah. Our text comes from this “First Isaiah” block.

As a side note, the later chapters of Isaiah were written more than 150 years later by followers of the original prophet — and like First Isaiah, include some of the most profound words in all of Scripture.

First Isaiah was written during a period when the city of Jerusalem...which was pretty much all that remained of the once powerful united kingdom of Israel...was under serious siege. As First Isaiah was being written...between 742 and 700 BCE...the rest of what was left of this once proud nation had either fallen to or was about to fall to the Assyrians. Jerusalem alone survived the Assyrian onslaught.

And arguably, its survival was meaningful in part because the leaders actually listened to our prophet...First Isaiah. He advised successive Kings during this precarious time...and they listened, which is rather amazing given how harshly he criticized the leaders.

To call what First Isaiah had to say to these Kings advice...well that doesn’t fully capture what he had to say. He was not only criticizing but also warning the once proud people...warning that they needed to renew their covenantal relationship with the God they called Yahweh...to renew their seriously flagging faith.

Ominously, he warned that if they didn’t...it would be curtains. And that is essentially what our text this morning is doing. But even more than a warning...it’s actually like a threat...a threat that God will lift his protection because of a lack of justice and

righteousness. And given that the rest of the Kingdom had either fallen...or was about to fall...this gave some credence to what First Isaiah had to say.

The lot of Israelite prophets was quite unpleasant. They had the task of speaking on behalf of YHWH...and were almost always harshly critical of the powers that be...not to mention the people as a whole. Real courage was required...and First Isaiah fits that mold perfectly.

And our reading is about as harsh as it gets. It's basically a prophecy that God will withhold protection of his beloved city because the chosen people had forsaken their faith.

Turning to our text, what starts out sounding like a love song, quickly turns to reveal God's frustration, anger, disappointment...and eventually God's **judgment**.

The text mostly consists of God speaking through the prophet...a classic approach of the Israelite prophets. The passage describes how God lovingly cultivated this vineyard...which we are eventually told is Israel...and how the fruit of the vineyard disappointed God. God "expected it to yield grapes...but it yielded wild grapes."

And then, amping up the bitterness and disappointment, God complains, "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 wild grapes?"

Have you ever felt this way? Have you ever worked at a relationship and had the relationship fall through...or been disappointed by the behavior of another party in whom you had invested time and hope?

This is an all too human experience. It could be a wayward child...a fallen mentor...a lover...but someone who deeply disappoints us. And so, feeling sorry for ourselves, we might ask, what more could I have done? Why did this have to happen? Why me?

Throughout the first five books of the Old Testament, we are painstakingly told how God had cultivated his chosen people. Think of the investment going all the way back to Abraham and his offspring...Moses...Joshua...David...Solomon. This was a relationship that held much promise for God. These were to be God's people through whom the rest of the world was to be blessed. God was deeply invested.

And so Isaiah presents God as basically feeling sorry for himself...but also angry to the point of needing to do something about it. You know what you did wrong...so I guess I'll have to punish you. And God says: "And now I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard. I will remove its hedge, and it shall be devoured."

Can you imagine? The closest feeling that comes to my mind is that of a parent with a seriously wayward child. But could you imagine leaving your child...no matter what they had done...leaving them to the wolves? Purposely allowing them to fall? Could you imagine doing such a thing? This certainly isn't the way I think of God.

Finally, in the closing verse, God tersely tells us what his people did wrong. The text says, "He expected justice, but saw bloodshed; righteousness, but heard a cry." Without spelling out the details, this does not sound good. This is certainly not the behavior of a people through whom the rest of the world is to be blessed.

But one thing for sure...God's judgment is clear. The people have disappointed and the verdict is quite harsh.

Well, I suppose you could say there is somewhat of a happy ending to this story. The good news is that Jerusalem did not fall...this time that is. Isaiah counseled the King to avoid both making alliances with pagan nations and surrendering...both of which would betray a lack of confidence in God.

And it really was a miracle that Jerusalem survived. The Assyrians were about to pounce and for no apparent reason pulled back. This is literally the way it happened. There is no record of why they pulled back.

Regardless, we are left to wonder what to make of this threatening depiction of God. Whether you believe this miracle was an act of God...or you believe God was prepared to follow through on the threat...or you don't believe in that sort of thing at all...one thing I know for sure is that this is a vision of God that I would prefer not to think about.

In contrast to this depiction, I think it's fair to say that we Christians tend to think of a loving and forgiving God...a God who through Jesus provides the way to redemption...despite our erring ways.

Well, our text from Luke also doesn't really mesh very well with this upbeat depiction. In our reading, Jesus, talking to the Disciples, seems to be angrily chastising his most loyal followers. "Do you think I came to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division." And he basically calls them...along with the rest of the crowd...a bunch of hypocrites.

I have a tough time processing this image of Jesus. My rationalization of this text is that Jesus is essentially tired of being seen as merely the nice guy...the loving and forgiving type...that Jesus is saying to his Disciples that there is more to his message. And so maybe he makes his point by exaggerating...by being unusually aggressive.

The footnotes in my Bible describe this passage as "The controversial character of Jesus' mission." Now that sounds like an understatement to me. This message is far different from what we hear in most other parts of Luke. For me, it's downright disturbing.

But any way you slice it, both of our passages this morning are troubling for those of us who tend to emphasize the loving, forgiving and reconciling nature of God.

And so the question I have for all of us this morning is whether the *Christian Century* headline had it right. Is our vision of God too nice?

For me, these texts seem almost like smelling salt...they kind of shock me. And maybe that is the point of the texts. Maybe they are meant to shock...as a way of reminding us...in a not too friendly way...that there is more to God's message...that there is more to God.

Maybe the message is that when we focus solely on the loving and forgiving aspect of God, we limit God...we don't see the full picture. Maybe in a purposefully shocking way, Scripture is telling us that that God is also judgmental...that God might actually be disappointed in us from time to time.

Perhaps the point we need to be reminded of is that loving and forgiving...God's grace...are only part of who God is. This point is underscored when we consider the fact that forgiveness only makes sense when there is something to forgive. Almost by definition, there can't be forgiveness without disappointment...and disappointment and judgment go hand in hand.

Said differently, forgiveness is not relevant unless mistakes are made...and prior to forgiveness, judgment is necessary. We can't always discern when we have done something wrong...maybe we need judgment from time to time...to remind us that we are far from perfect. I think we can say that this is kind of basic to Christianity.

So, in a sense, this disappointment thing...judgment thing...it really is kind of like a parent-child relationship.

When I was 9 years old...I did something I'll never forget...and more importantly, my parents did something that helped me remember.

I was in the front hall of our house, and John, a friend of my older brother's, was there. Well John was really more like my brother's rival. They were both very good tennis players — the two best of their age in Cincinnati.

No one else was in the room...and feeling a bit cheeky, I said something like the following to John: "My brother beat you the other day...even though he's a year younger than you are. He must be much better than you."

John was a really nice guy...and clearly far more mature than I was...so he basically ignored me. But just my luck...my parents overheard this. And to make a long story short, they pulled me aside, calmly told me why what I said was wrong...and how *disappointed* they were. And then they grounded me.

My mother and I have this long-running joke. Perhaps I shouldn't admit this, but to this day, whenever I say or do something sarcastic...or not so nice...my mother's refrain is..."Al, you used to be so nice." Well, clearly this story brings my mother's comment into question...maybe I wasn't so nice.

But, nice or not...the interesting thing is that I remember this story as vividly today as when it happened. But the funny thing is, if my parents hadn't told me what I had done wrong...hadn't told me how *disappointed* they were...and hadn't punished me...I likely wouldn't have remembered. But here I am, 44 years later, and I still cringe when I think about what I said.

I remember being judged by my parents...and I remember being punished. And likely because of this, I never did anything like it again. Not because I was afraid of the punishment...but because it was clear to me...from the judgment, reinforced by the punishment, that what I did was wrong.

As I reflect on the cover of the *Christian Century*, it occurs to me that the real concern this morning isn't whether God is too nice...but instead how we can embrace the full nature of Scripture...the full nature of God. Our tendency is to try to gloss over these troubling passages...but maybe they are meant to shock...to wake us up...to be a not so friendly reminder that there is so much more to God.

...That God is not just about loving and forgiving...that, in fact, the forgiving part doesn't even make sense unless we know that there is something to judge and forgive...that because of our imperfections, we actually need God's judgment.

Good parenting requires guidance and teaching. It requires love...but also setting of boundaries. And without judgment, boundaries would be very hard to find.

And without judgment...I probably wouldn't still be cringing over something I said when I was 9 years old.

Judgment isn't something to be afraid of...we actually need it...maybe even crave it. And so this morning, I'm thankful for today's text...a not so friendly reminder...that we need God...all of God.

Yes, this morning I'm thankful for judgment...thankful for God's good judgment.

Amen.

Plymouth Church
Sermon August 15, 2010, Al Bunis

Go now with God
Be not tempted to stay in the safety of known places
Be not tempted to go only in your own time
Chose to go with God
Elect not to go alone

Go in the faith that there is no valley so low
No wilderness so vast
No passage so crooked
That God is not already there waiting to be with you

Amen.