

THE VIEW FROM THE VINEYARD
Toronto United Mennonite Church
October 30, 2016

Scripture Reading: Isaiah 5:1-7; John 15:1-11

Jerusalem's Harvest Festival was in full swing. Perhaps not unlike the Grape and Wine Festival celebrated over 2,700 years later in the Niagara region where I grew up, this was a boisterous event. People came from far and wide for a full week of feasting and merry-making.

The original purpose of this annual festival was twofold: first, to remember God's provision during 40 years of wandering in the desert and, second, to give thanks to God for the fruitful bounty of the Promised Land. But most revellers seemed more interested in either parading their personal prosperity or drowning their sorrows.

Buskers worked their way through the bargain-seeking crowd in the marketplace, singing their stories of desire and pleasure or want and woe.

Among them this year was a familiar voice, a sombre, even frightening, balladeer named Isaiah. His lyrics were generally biting in their social, economic and political critique. They spoke of greed, the abuse of land and slaves, the neglect of true worship of God, of God's impending judgment – not a sentiment this audience wanted to hear, particularly during this celebratory season of the year. Most did their best to avoid or ignore Isaiah and his doom-and-gloom message.

But on this day, the balladeer appeared not in his customary sackcloth and ashes but in a colourful wedding garment!

And when this angry prophet-turned-colourful entertainer paused at the temple gates and sang a new tune, attention turned his way once again.

"Let me sing for my beloved a love song," he began. Ears perked up! The vine-yards which dotted the Judean hills were a common metaphor for matrimony. Song of Songs, some will have recalled, celebrated the bride as "My vineyard...You, O Solomon, may have the thousand..." (8:12)

Here then comes the best man, as it were, a messenger for the groom, extolling the virtues of the bridegroom's vineyard. He sings of a vineyard planted on a very fertile hill. How the sunny slope was dug up, cleared of stones and planted with choicest vines.

Smiles of recognition spread across the sun baked faces in the crowd. But the work had only just begun. This farmer was so sure of a bountiful harvest in due course that he spared no effort or expense. His love and devotion for this "bride" knew no bounds or limits.

And so, with the stones gathered from the field, he built a wall to protect the vines from rodents, wild animals and stray cattle. He added a watchtower from which to keep guard and frighten away predators who might ravage the crop.

Then he cut a winepress into the side of the hill, a tub press, cut into the stone with a trough leading to a lower level vat into which the juice would run and where sediment could settle before the juice was poured into wineskins for fermentation.

This would be a world class vineyard, built to produce the finest of wines!

And then the farmer waited “and looked for it to yield grapes.” After all, it takes at least five years for vines to be strong and mature enough to produce a plentiful harvest.

Knowing smiles spread across the sea of faces. This anticipation was all too familiar. But here they were, celebrating another vintage harvest. Shouts of appreciation and encouragement rang out!

When suddenly, the tone and mood shifted dramatically. This vineyard, so carefully planted and painstakingly tended, the balladeer continued, yielded only “wild grapes”! Sour grapes.

Faces fell at this catastrophic turn of events. From time to time one might find a wild plant among the good, one that was quickly removed and replaced. But a whole vineyard of small, hard, sour grapes?! How could this be?

Joy turned to disbelief and anger. And the balladeer invited his listeners to determine where the fault lay.

³And 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 wild grapes?

Curses rang out. Shouts of condemnation, as the balladeer continued:

⁵And 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 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.

Shouts of approval rang out. Turn that vineyard into a wasteland!

But gradually a quiet murmur permeated the angry crowd. What was this about “commanding the clouds [not to] rain”?!

Those were ominous words. Who but Yahweh, the Creator of the universe, had such power? Who then was this bedeviled farmer?

And quick and sharp like the blade of an axe the verdict fell.

⁷ The vineyard of the LORD of hosts is the house of Israel, and the people of Judah are his pleasant planting; he expected justice, but saw bloodshed; righteousness, but heard a cry!

A deafening silence fell over the crowd. Eyes lowered, feet shuffled nervously, as the “Woe unto you...” of a more familiar voice rang out.

And quick as summer lightning the searing truth burned into their minds and hearts. This story within a story was THEIR story. The farmer/husbandman was none other than Yahweh, the God of their forbears, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. And Isaiah, the balladeer, was God’s prophet.

And the vineyard? The bride? A tremor of recognition shook the crowd.

Had they not heard and celebrated their chosen status as God’s own vineyard, God’s bride? Had not Asaph, the psalm-writer poet, taught them to sing about their deliverance from Egypt:

You [LORD God of hosts] brought a vine out of Egypt; you drove out the nations and planted it. You cleared the ground for it and it took root and filled the land...Turn again, O God of hosts; look down from heaven and see; have regard for this vine, the stock that your right hand planted... (Ps. 80:8,9,14)

Israel. God’s chosen. Delivered from slavery into a land flowing with milk and honey. God’s own vineyard, covering the mountain slopes from the river on the east to the sea on the west. Now God’s unfaithful bride, producing sour grapes, the bitter fruit of disobedience.

The balladeer’s “Woe unto you...” rang repeatedly through the marketplace. Five woes in quick succession condemning greed, self-indulgence, arrogance, immorality and injustice.

And the rhetorical question echoed through the marketplace and hung over the despondent crowd:
⁴What 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?

I am a transplanted vine. I was born Paraguay, South America and had the great fortune of being transplanted to a farm in the fertile fruit growing Niagara peninsula. To Vineland, no less!

Many of my coreligionists, Mennonite refugees and immigrants who preceded me through the centuries to settle in Canada, were likewise transplanted into fertile soil, literally and figuratively. Others have followed more recently, many with their own painful story of uprooting and transplanting. We are now an increasingly diverse vineyard.

When I read this text, and I survey the landscape of Canada, which many of these newcomers came believing was quite literally their Promised Land, “the land of Canaan”, as some Mennonite refugees from the Soviet Union called it, when I ponder this diverse vineyard of Mennonites, I sometimes wonder why I and we have been chosen to be so fortunate. Why we of all the little tribes of homeless people around the globe through the centuries have had the good fortune to be planted here? And what it is we are producing where we are planted?

It’s a sobering burden to be so blessed. Chosen perhaps as Israel, God’s people, were centuries ago, to be blessed in order to be a blessing.

What more is there that the vine grower who planted us here could have done for us? And what kind of fruit are we bearing?

A question that might well be asked of Christians around the world, all those who claim the name and blessing of this God, the Almighty vine grower. And we pray with Asaph, the poet, pleads with God for his people: “Restore us, O God of hosts; let your face shine, that we may be saved.” (Ps. 80:7)

Sometimes this blessing feels more like a burden. The burden of being a good enough steward, of being fruitful enough, of producing only good fruit. Where is the grace? Where do the wisdom, strength and sustenance come from?

That’s where Jesus’ words in John 15 help me. In this familiar vineyard parable, Jesus shifts the image. Shifts the focus. Shifts the relationship.

This teaching is also about bearing fruit. In fact, if you were counting you would have heard the word “fruit” 7 times in the first 8 verses and twice more after that. It appears as often as the word “love,” which occurs 9 times in 9 verses! So there is something here about love being the fruit. But that will have to wait for another time.

The word that is used most often in this teaching? “Abide.” Remain. Stay put. Which is a translation of the Greek word: “*meno*”. Yes, you heard correctly. “***Meno***.”

I’m not sure what, if anything, that has to do with Menno Simons, the Catholic priest turned Anabaptist preacher and missionary after whom our particular small band of Christ followers is named, though the word and name help me remember this eternal truth about discipleship and spiritual fruit bearing. Abide. Remain.

Perhaps there is wise counsel and helpful encouragement for us here as we seek to live fruitful lives in our time and place as heirs of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and followers of the Son of their God and ours, Jesus the Christ, himself a prophet balladeer who walked and preached throughout the same fertile countryside as Isaiah some centuries later.

This teaching is also about bearing fruit. But notice wherein the fertility of these vines lies. It grows out of a relationship. A connection to the “true vine.” Not in passivity, New Testament scholar Gordon Zerbe maintains, but in solidarity. Solidarity yields fertility; no solidarity yields infertility. No fruit.

⁴Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. ⁵I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.

Literally translated, the words “you can do nothing” would be, “you have no power!” *Dunamis* is the Greek word used here. The root for the English word, dynamite. In other words, apart from me, you’re a dud! No bang in this firecracker!

Abide in me. It's a pretty simple formula, really, which requires no tilling of hard, stony ground, chasing away hungry predators, or picking ripe fruit under a blazing sun.

⁴Abide in me: that's how the sap, the power flows and the fruit grows. To abide is to bear fruit. No abiding, no fruit. In fact, no abiding, no life! The branch withers and dies. It is not so much cut off as that it has cut itself off from its life-giving power by not abiding.

And here's where another word comes to the fore: **love**. ⁹Abide in my love.

To **abide**, Zerbe writes, is to **love**. There's a symbiotic relationship here. And, moreover, it is to **be sent**, which is to bear fruit. Jesus continues this teaching by telling the disciples, ¹⁶ "I appointed (lit., chose) you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last."

Go. Bear fruit. Fruit that will last, that will remain or abide. It's the same word. *Meno*.

⁹Abide in my love. Those two words: abide and love, offer the key. It's not the soil in which we're planted or the stock from which we come. Not the extra-ordinary efforts we expend or the resources we invest.

Our fruitfulness, of which loving relationships are a sign, is the result of an 'abiding' relationship with Jesus.

I conclude with Gordon Zerbe's words in a two-part commentary on John 15 some years ago in *The Mennonite* magazine (Aug. 24 & Sept. 14, 1993). Zerbe wrote:

The imagery of the entire passage reminds me of the picture that frames the entire biblical drama: the tree of life. In the beginning of the story (Genesis 2) we meet the tree of life in an agricultural setting – in the middle of a garden. Humans are free to eat its fruit at any time, to sustain their lives.

At the end of the story (Revelation 22) we meet the tree of life in the center of the city square, along the main thoroughfare, and a river runs through it. The tree straddles the river of life and bears 12 different kinds of fruit...a new fruit each month, and its leaves are for the healing of the nations.

What a remarkable image of God's reign, which we await and which has dawned with Jesus. May we be fruitful, and may God's reign come on earth, as it is in heaven.

AMEN