

A Sermon for DaySpring

by Eric Howell

Deadly Fruit

Isaiah 5

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Here's a story. . .

A teacher plans her lessons for the semester, sets up her gradebook. She goes to all the trainings, working nights in the summer to get ready. She preps the classroom, stands awkwardly at Meet the Teacher wondering if she'll remember all these new names, but she's been studying them for weeks. Now names have faces and personalities and hearts and minds to be educated. She's ready. She's done everything she can to make this year the absolute best and give her students every advantage.

But the class quickly goes downhill. They are disrespectful to her and even worse to one another. The popular kids in class bully the shy kids. The kids from wealthier homes make fun of the kids whose shoes are the brand name. No one can learn anything even if they wanted to. It's not long before she dreads going to class. Her dreams of inspiring the minds of young people come crashing.

That's a sad story. A terrible story. Sometimes there's a wide and utterly painful chasm between the hopes we had and the reality we face.

Here's another one:

A couple plan a party for their friends and neighbors. They do everything with giddiness: buy the best cheeses and salamis for appetizers. You know it's good when you don't call it a cheese and meat board but a charcuterie board. They plan the menu; have just the right pairing of drinks with each course. They even have party hats and decorations around the house. They spend days cleaning and compiling the perfect song set list. Then the party time begins, and no one comes; no one cares. What do we do with all this food? What do we do with this sadness?

Sometimes everything goes wrong despite everything you've done to make it right. Those are terrible stories. And here's another one, about a vineyard owner, as told by Isaiah the prophet.

My beloved planted a vineyard on a hill with rich soil, the right sun, and good rain. It was a fertile hill. He cleared it of stones, digging them out by hand. He planted the very best grape vines. Then he took the stones he'd dug and built them into a watchtower for protection, to be able to keep an eye over everything. Then he hewed out a wine vat, the final step of expectation of what will be when the best grapes in the best soil, cared for in the best way bear their sweet fruit.

Then, he expected it to yield grapes, but it produced wild grapes. Wild grapes, after all that?

He was expecting Brunello di Montalcino and got Barefoot shiraz. He was expecting a glass of French burgundy and got a mason jar of Yellow Tail Merlot.

That's the kind of story these all are:

You're expecting Moroso's, and you get Totino's frozen pizza.

You're expecting a Little Red Rider BB Gun, and you get a crummy football.

How are you feeling about that? Angry, despondent?

The vineyard owner was. What did he do?

He abandoned that vineyard, tore down the walls, let the thorns and weeds take over, even told the clouds not to bother raining on this vineyard. He walked away and let them be. I'm done with you. I can't take anymore. You're on your own.

This one's a painful, terrible story like the other two, but since we know what the vineyard owner does in response, it raises some thorny questions.

What's bad about the story? Is it the rashness of the vineyard owner and how he responds to the failure? Maybe the vineyard owner is too quick to be judgmental. He gives up on the vineyard for producing wild grapes, but maybe wild grapes can be good? Maybe grapes with a little wild side—what are wild grapes anyway? Grapes with tatoos and mohawks--have their place alongside the more refined versions. A little wildness is refreshing sometimes. Sometimes we need people to stand firm for the tried and true, good and tested, traditional way of doing things. But sometimes we also need those who challenge the tradition, who have fresh eyes for a different way of seeing the world and their place in it. Grapes and wild grapes, maybe together there's a nice blend between them.

So it seems like it's a bad story because of the actions of the landowner. We have stories about Jesus who didn't act like that at all. "Give the fig tree just one more year," the hero in his parable says, "give me a year to see if I can tend to it so it bears fruit." "Give her another chance at life," he said to the crowd with stones in their hands. Peter, do you love me? You denied me, but now tend my sheep. Jesus is the divine giver of 2nd chances and 3rd chances, and what did he say, not 7 or 70 but 7x70 times to forgive.

This is not that kind of story, right? But what kind of story is this? This vineyard story is about vines who were given every advantage and every opportunity and instead of grapes produced, what? It may not be what we think, and that may change the way we hear the story. Because the word is not actually best translated as "wild grapes," and that makes a lot of difference in how you read the story and maybe how you see the vineyard owner. There's nothing in the word about grapes or wildness. It's a rare Hebrew word only used here in this one verse in the whole the Bible, but its root is more common. Its root means "to stink." One translation gets closer to it. He expected grapes but got *stinkberries* (which is actually a real thing). But the problem there is that it's kind of a funny word, a stinkberry. It's not just that it stinks, the root of the word is the stench of death. It's not just stinky grapes or stinky fruit, it's poison fruit.

So, I think the way to read this is: “He was looking for good grapes, but instead got poison.” He was looking for a glass of chianti and got a mouthful of drano. This stuff will kill you. Does that change how you see his response to the vineyard? And what’s going on here?

It turns out, you find out by the end of the story, it’s a parable. And as the Old Testament sometimes does, it is turned on you. You are the vineyard. You’re not just a little rebellious, a little free spirited . . . you are poison. It’s a terrible story of the worst kind, when you find out you’re the problem. Remember Nathan to David: “You are the man”? This is Isaiah’s version. You’re the vineyard.

This is the story this is telling: The God of Love and Hope gave you everything you could have needed or wanted, but you failed to be the people you were to be. It’s a very particular judgment in this story. God expected justice in his people and instead of finding justice being lived out among them, found bloodshed. God expected righteousness in his people, but then heard outcries of suffering.

This is what God wants from God’s people: wants us to treat others with justice and to live with righteousness. Justice, in this sense, is to recognize all people have dignity and worth. Every person, all creatures are beloved to God. If the rest of all the people in the world can’t seem to remember that, God’s people must remember it for them. If the rest of the people in the world are lives lived out by power assured by violence, God’s people are to be people whose lives are generosity and grace, lived out in peace. All people are created in God’s image and redeemed by Christ. They are to live with justice. And with righteousness. Righteousness means doing what needs to be done when it needs to be done even if it’s costly. It’s a way of life that is lived in right relationship with God, with creation, with other people, and with yourself. That’s a high calling. When God makes a community of his people, he judges them by justice and righteousness, which comes down ultimately to how the powerful treat the powerless. That’s where the rubber meets the road.

This is what God wants. We find it all over the Bible. The call to justice and righteousness. But we also find God’s people not being the people they were given every grace to be. We are indeed sinners, who can really hurt other people by what we do or what we fail to do.

And passages like this, whether from the prophets or the poets or Jesus himself, remind us that God is not just benignly floating on the clouds, passing out blessings and patiently waiting for our occasional gratitude. And God is not just a distant deity unmoved by the plight of human suffering. God expects his people to live with one another and with their God in redemptive, compassionate, holy ways. That message is all through the scriptures especially in the prophets. Here it is in Isaiah. Micah asks “What does the Lord require of you but to do justice and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God?” Amos thunders, “Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an everflowing stream.” Hosea . . . Jeremiah . . . Jesus turns over tables in the Temple and then makes a beeline for those around him who are suffering the injustice and unrighteousness of the powerful, especially the religious powerful. And then he wears their scorn and wears their cross.

This vineyard story is terrible; it's heartbreaking, it's tragic, but now we see it's not because the landowner was so mean or unjust or impatient; it's because the vines, the people, are so rotten, they have become anti witnesses of God's grace, and they are dangerous to everyone else around them. I see the landowner saying, "I will abandon you for a time. I will go away from you." It's a sad story of severe mercy.

There is good news in this story. It's there if you look hard enough. There's gospel in every story if you have eyes to see. The vines aren't uprooted and thrown into the fire. I think that's important. They are left on their own for a while. Remember as Isaiah prophesied, Israel went into exile. Sometimes, we feel awfully alone.

The good news in this story, if you look to see it, is that for all that the beloved did to remove himself from the vineyard, he didn't rip up the roots. Which means there's still hope. There's always still hope for renewal, for conversion, for remembrance of who you are and who you were made to be.

The same God who abandons the vineyard in chapter 5 and sends Israel into exile is the same God who in Chapter 35 sings of a highway of holiness for the redeemed to walk back home because the lord has rescued them.

Is the same God who in Isaiah 40, "Comfort, comfort my people says your God, speak tenderly to Jerusalem that her hard service has been completed, her sin has been paid for, a voice in the wilderness cries, "Come home."

And who in Isaiah 53 says, "he took our pain and bore our suffering, he was pierced for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities and by his wounds, we are made whole."

And is the same God incarnate, Jesus of Nazareth who remembers and redeems the vineyard story, "I am the vine, you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit but apart from me you can do nothing. . . . I chose you. I appointed you to bear fruit that will last. . . Love one another."

That's a beautiful story. That's a redemption story. It is the kind of story we need, even today. Let us ask the Lord to keep us with him, and let us abide in Jesus so that we may in our lives produce the good fruit of our Lord living in and through us.