

'Sour Grapes" A sermon based on Isaiah 5:1-7; Hebrews 11:29-12:2; and Luke 12:49-56 delivered by the Rev. Alison Andrea Young on Sunday, August 17, 2004 at the First Congregational UCC of Onkama, Michigan.

"My loved one had a vineyard on a fertile hillside. He dug it up and cleared it of stones and planted it with the choicest vines. . . Then he looked for a crop of good grapes, but it yielded only bad fruit.," (Isaiah 5:1-3) Along with the olive and fig trees, the grapevine is and was one of the most characteristic plants of Palestine. This is why vineyards, vines, and grapes have made their way into the biblical witness by way of illustration through countless examples, both in the Hebrew and the Christian scriptures. Who can forget Jesus' description of himself and his role in this world when he said, "I am the vine and you are the branches . . ." in John 15:5.

This morning's passage from Isaiah provides modern readers and scholars with one of the most comprehensive descriptions of the process of planting a vineyard, and has actually been used by commentators and historians, alike, to reconstruct the art of ancient viticulture. Grapes and their byproducts, raisins and grape syrup, which was used like honey, and wine were a very important part of the economy of Palestine at that time. This crop was so important that when it began to be harvested too early, to meet the ever-present demand, say toward the end of July, instead of in the fullness of August or September, the grapes are quite sour. They have not had time to soak up enough sun to convert the nutrients of soil and water to their natural sugars. Early harvested grapes such as these have been described in the books of the Prophets Jeremiah (31:29-30) and Ezekiel (18:2) as being able to "set the teeth on edge."

We all have had similar experiences. We go to the produce section of our local grocery store, and pick up a bunch of grapes. They look full-bodied, shiny, and delectable. But once we get them home and sample them, we find that they are sour. They can literally "set our teeth on edge." This is such a good description of what it feels like to crunch into a sour grape, especially if we have been expecting a sweet juicy taste. We are disappointed because our expectations haven't been met. And we, like the beloved vine dresser described in Isaiah, are disappointed. This experience has become so much a part of our history and experience that the term "sour grapes" has taken on a life of its own. We use this term to mean the way that people feel and act when they have not gotten their own way or when their expectations have not been met. They feel disappointed, blame others, and sometimes lash out in revenge. When someone acts in this way we say, "Oh, that's just 'sour grapes'." When someone who thinks that they should have

received a promotion but is passed over in favor of someone else and they treat that person badly afterwards, it is "sour grapes." When a student does not get the grade that he or she expected on a certain test or paper and thereafter goes about bad-mouthing the teacher, it is "sour grapes."

When someone that we consider "unworthy" because of our perception and judgment that they lack moral fiber, like Rahab, the prostitute mentioned in our Hebrews passage this morning along with all that topsy-turvy list of the redeemed faithful, and that person receives the same blessings from God as we do, so we feel we can gossip about them and treat them badly, that is "sour grapes." When someone that we perceive as being lazy gets ahead and receives more "things" than we do, we feel justified in spreading rumors about them to try to sully their character, and that, too, is "sour grapes."

Behavior like this, described as being "sour grapes," like the bitter fruit itself, according to scripture, is unacceptable to God. Our passage from Isaiah describes in frighteningly graphic detail what God will do to the vineyard that produces this "bad fruit." "I will make it waste;" God declares, "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." (Isaiah 5:5-6) The "sour grapes" will, of course, just become more sour in this way because with lack of tending of the soil, lack of nurture, and lack of water and nutrients, the fruit has no chance to sweeten and ripen. God, Isaiah reminds us, will withdraw God's support from the vineyard (in this case Israel and Judah, V. 7) that resorts to "sour grapes" behavior.

Jesus is saying much the same thing in our passage from the gospel of Luke this morning. He is reminding his followers that he did not come to prop-up their "business as usual" behavior. He did not come to condone their hypocritical stance, their "sour grapes" attitude, which allowed them to condemn others but not look to change their own unfaithful actions. He challenges them. He says " <sup>51</sup>Do you think I came to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but division. <sup>52</sup>From now on there will be five in one family divided against each other, three against two and two against three. <sup>53</sup>They will be divided, father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law. . . .When you see a cloud rising in the west, immediately you say, 'It's going to rain,' and it does. And when the south wind blows, you say, 'It's going to be hot,' and it is. Hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of the earth and the sky. How is it that you don't know how to interpret this present time?" (Luke 12:51-56)

What Jesus is NOT saying here is that he is causing the divisions and the difficulties to happen. What Jesus IS saying here is that, by way of contrast, his example of how to live, that his modeling of a way to follow him faithfully, will naturally cause divisions because each person has the will to choose to respond to that way by a disparity of behavior. Our Hebrews passage this morning describes our looking to Jesus' model of the way to live in these words, "looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith/" (v. Hebrews 12:2) What the author of Hebrews is reminding us is that our behavior is shown up for what it really is by way of contrast with Jesus' teachings and actions.

The divisions and difficulties that Jesus speaks of in the Luke passage relate directly to our response to his teachings. Some will continue to point the finger and act out in a "sour grapes" manner when things don't go their way, and others will look to their own backyard, to see what it is about their behavior that might need changing. So, we will be divided by our choice of response to the challenge of living a Christian life. The person who did not get the promotion, for example, might look to their job performance to see what could be improved instead of lashing out at the successful candidate. The student might look at his or her study skills to see what might work better in preparing for that test, and realize that the teacher was right to grade the test in that way. The person who sets themselves up as knowing what is best for all "the less worthy" people in the world, might look to their own behavior. Have they been entirely blameless in this life? The answer to that question is obvious!

As the author of the book of Hebrews reminds us, God's redemptive power reaches beyond what humans can even imagine. The list of the faithful then CAN include those for which we might hold a "sour grapes" judgmental attitude. Such "unworthies" would include Rahab, who though a harlot, received the spies in peace; and David, who was an adulterer and murderer, but became a respected King; and even Abraham, the Father of us all, who passed off Sarah, his wife, as his sister in order to save his own skin!

As Ralph Wood, a professor at Wake Forest University once remarked: "On and on runs the list of those, who, despite their moral failings, performed their faith before God . . . living for the promise whose fulfillment they never experienced." (Christian Century, August 2-9 1995, p. 737) On and on goes the list, a list which includes me and you and all those in our community. We receive the redemptive power of God as a gift, not because we are worthy or deserving of it, but because we are the recipients of Jesus' promises.

There is a classic Aesop's fable called "The Fox and the Grapes." In this fable a fox has just stolen a juicy bunch of grapes from someone's vineyard and as he runs from the scene of the crime, he crosses over a bridge that spans a quiet pool of water. As he crosses, he glances down and sees another fox there with a juicy bunch of grapes in his mouth. In order to attack that other fox and steal that second tempting bunch of grapes, the fox must open his mouth and, in doing so he drops his bunch of grapes that then are lost as they sink into the water. The splashing of the grapes in the water breaks up the mirror image of himself as what he thought was another fox, and all that remains is an image of himself—grape less. The fox, no doubt, was experiencing at that moment the concept of "sour grapes!" When our expectations of what we deserve because of how much better we are than other people are shattered like the image of the fox in the pool, we need to look to some other kind of behavior, not the "sour grapes" kind, in which to respond.

Where do we look for that kind of model? The author of Hebrews is very clear on that point. The scripture says, "Therefore since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses," that ragtag bunch of prostitutes, murderers, adulterers, martyrs and saints, which have just been described in the text, "let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him, endured the cross, disregarding its shame, . . ." (Hebrews 12:1-2, NRSV). Jesus, above all people, had good reason to react with "sour grapes." He was wrongfully accused, scourged, rejected, denied by his followers and friends, and finally crucified in an excruciatingly painful way alongside two criminals. And yet, Jesus remained steadfast in his faith in God, so much so that tradition tells us that from that cross he could say, "Father forgive them, for they know not what they do." (Luke 23:34) Far from "sour grapes," then, what we have here is just the sweet, sweet wine of Jesus' blood shed for us, and that has made all the difference. Amen.