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St. Paul Lutheran Church, Green Bay, Wisconsin
“The Song of the Vineyard”
Sermon Text: Isaiah 5:1-7**

**Pentecost 20 (Year A) - 10/16/2011**

“*My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness”* (2 Corinthians 12:9).

1 I will sing for the one I love
   a song about his vineyard:
My loved one had a vineyard
   on a fertile hillside.
2 He dug it up and cleared it of stones
   and planted it with the choicest vines.
He built a watchtower in it
   and cut out a winepress as well.
Then he looked for a crop of good grapes,
   but it yielded only bad fruit.

 3 “Now you dwellers in Jerusalem and men of Judah,
   judge between me and my vineyard.
4 What more could have been done for my vineyard
   than I have done for it?
When I looked for good grapes,
   why did it yield only bad?
5 Now I will tell you
   what I am going to do to my vineyard:
I will take away its hedge,
   and it will be destroyed;
I will break down its wall,
   and it will be trampled.
6 I will make it a wasteland,
   neither pruned nor cultivated,
   and briers and thorns will grow there.
I will command the clouds
   not to rain on it.”

 7 The vineyard of the Lord Almighty
   is the house of Israel,
and the men of Judah
   are the garden of his delight.
And he looked for justice, but saw bloodshed;
   for righteousness, but heard cries of distress.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Everybody can relate to a sad love song, because we’ve all loved and lost. From a little boy crying over a lost toy to a high school graduate mourning the passing of his childhood, from a jilted girlfriend to a disappointed wife, to a grieving widow: when we love someone or something, we want that love to come back to us, and we want it to last, but somewhere along the line, we’ve all been disappointed. So when a singer with a broken heart puts his feelings into verse and his emotions into music, everyone knows what he’s singing about.

That’s what we have in Isaiah, chapter five. Isaiah sings a song about the Lord’s great love for his people. The Lord has showered them with blessings and love, and he has great expectations for a glorious future together with them. But his people have turned on him. It almost sounds as though the Lord has a broken heart. But it’s not as though God is lonely or having trouble coping. He’s not sad for himself; he’s sad for us.

**1. Our sin makes us worthless vines.**

It’s a song about a vineyard. A man finds the perfect place for it. He plants it on a rich, fertile hillside. He digs it up and clears it of stones, and in Palestine there were usually enough of them to create a wall around the vineyard. This was back-breaking work. The man chooses a choice vine, one that is sure to produce beautiful, delicious grapes. In fact, he’s so certain of good fruit growing that he builds a watchtower before a grape has even grown. He’s sure there will be wandering animals and sneaking thieves coming after his crop. He also hollows out a large rock to turn it into a winepress. Then he waits. He has every right to expect a wonderful crop. But after all of his careful work and all of his attention to detail, his vine only produces rotten grapes. Isaiah uses a word for the grapes that literally means that they *stink: bah-AHSH.* It sounds like something you’d say if something smelled bad: *bah-AHSH*.

The vineyard stands for the people of Israel and Judah. He set them apart from all the people of the world. He freed them from slavery. He miraculously provided food and water for them in the desert. He settled them in their own land. He provided kings for them. He gave them priests to lead them in worship. He sent them prophets to keep them close to his Word. He promised them the Savior who would take all their sins away. They were his garden of delight. But what kind of fruit does the Lord see? You can appreciate Isaiah’s poetry better in Hebrew. The Lord looked for *mish–PAHT*, but he only found *mish–PAH*. The Lord looked for justice, but he saw bloodshed. He looked for *tsi-DAH-kah*, but he only found *tsi-AH-kah*. He looked for righteousness, but instead heard cries of distress.

Jesus tells the same story in the New Testament. Today’s gospel, the parable of the tenants, is a parable about how God’s chosen and beloved people ignored and mistreated his prophets, turned to false gods, and eventually killed God’s own Son. In fact, this story, this sad love song, started at the fall into sin, and it will be playing until the day this world comes to an end.

You and I are the Lord’s vineyard. Think of everything he has given to us. He has given us family and friends, food and shelter. He has sent us leaders and teachers to guide us in his Word. He has supplied us with a mind-boggling array of gifts and talents, and has given us bountiful opportunities to use them and find fulfillment and purpose in doing so. He has filled our lives with the love of dear family members and friends. Best of all, he has sent his Son into the world to rescue us from the sin that would separate us from God. He has cleared the path to heaven, and has told us that because of this rescue we can expect a place with our Heavenly Father.

And yet the fruit of our rotten sinful nature continues to grow. Our gratitude and thankfulness for his gifts lasts a few moments and is quickly replaced with discontentment and disappointment. We use our gifts and talents to serve wonderfully, but then we stop, we bury our gifts, and we complain that people don’t serve us enough. When we serve, we don’t do it in the name of Jesus. We do it in our own name. We pass up our opportunities to praise God, and we seek praise for ourselves.

If it sounds like this is being unfair, listen to what the Lord says in verses 3 and 4. He says, “Judge for yourselves.” Look at the record of God’s grace and love. Is there anything more he could do for us lost sinners than what he has done? Now consider the continuing record of your sins, sins of thought, of word, of deed. Sins of commission, sins of omission. Should not God cast us aside? Should he not leave us forever? Maybe we soothe our conscience by saying God understands our sin, so he won’t hold it against us. *Bah-AHSH!*  This is the fruit that stinks. Away with all excuses! Not one of your sins or mine holds up under an excuse. What fools we are for being so ready to throw away God’s blessings for excuses!

The sad song of Isaiah is followed with a dark warning from the Lord. He says: *“I will tell you what I am going to do to my vineyard: I will take away its hedge… I will break down its wall… I will make it a wasteland, neither pruned nor cultivated, and briers and thorns will grow there. I will command the clouds not to rain on it”* (v.5-6). It happened in Isaiah’s time. The nation of Assyria wiped the northern nation of Israel off the map in 722 B.C. A century and a half later, the new world power of Babylon captured the southern people of Judah and took them away as slaves. The Babylonians destroyed the wall around Jerusalem, and for 70 years what was once God’s garden of delight became a briar patch.

But the Lord’s warning doesn’t stop there. His warning is for all who have forsaken his love and turned from him. His warning is for us. Listen to John the Baptist: “The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire” (Matthew 3:10). The writer to the Hebrews says, “If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God” (Hebrews 10:26-27).

 Of all the sad love songs, none is sadder than this one. But the song doesn’t end sadly.

**2. Our Savior is the one, true Vine.**

Listen closely to Jesus in today’s Gospel. Yes, God’s people had rejected his Son, but Jesus’ song doesn’t end there. Jesus quotes Psalm 118 and says, “The one the builders rejected has become the capstone. The Lord has done this and it is marvelous in our eyes.”

Think of it! God uses the very rejection that arouses his anger against sin and he makes it a part of his plan to rescue the world. So great is our wickedness that his saving plan depends on it. So great is God’s love that he sacrifices his one and only beloved Son for us!

And now this rejected Son of God is the very one who turns this sad song to a song of joy. If anyone had the right to sing an aching song of disappointment it was Jesus. From the cross we should be hearing the most heart-wrenching song of love lost ever sung from the Son of God being crucified by the creatures he came to help. But that’s not what we hear. He says, “Father, forgive them!” He says to the repentant thief, “Today, you will be with me in paradise.” He says, “It is finished.”

On the third day, our innocent substitute rose again from the dead. He defeated death. And he did it for all people. How can anyone possibly sing a sad song after such a triumphant, world-shaking victory? Paul picks up the melody of this song in his first letter to the Corinthians: “Death, where is your sting? Grave, where is your victory?”

October is the month of spooky graveyards, but we don’t have to whistle when we walk through the graveyard to calm our nerves; we don’t have to let grief rule our lives and rob us of the joy God has in store for us, even in this world of sin and death. We can sing with a smile on our face and joy in our heart: What comfort this sweet sentence gives: I know that my Redeemer lives! Not the devil, nor death, nor hell can silence our Savior’s song of victory. “Because I live,” says Jesus, “you also will live.”

Jesus makes all the difference. He is the perfect Vine we could never be because of our sin. In fact, he says just that on the very night of his death on the cross for the sins of the world. You aren’t the vine that bears rotten fruit. Jesus says to all of his followers: “I am the vine, you are the branches; if you remain in me, you will bear much fruit.”

Jesus is the difference between rotten fruit and beautiful fruit. Apart from him we can do nothing. Even the things that look wonderful and draw the praise and admiration of the world around us are still rotten on the inside apart from Jesus. We need his forgiveness, his righteousness, his love. The whole world can call you a saint, but as long as sin is on your record, you still stink to high heaven. But in Jesus, you really are a saint, and through faith in him, the Spirit grows fruit in you that is beautiful, fruit that lasts: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, self-control. The world around you might not see this fruit at all; you might not see it in its full beauty either. You might see only half efforts at this kind of fruit. But the Lord sees beautiful, perfect fruit. He sees the fruit he was longing for when he planted you.

Jesus makes all the difference when trouble comes. Why do we suffer? Why do we get sick? Why do we get discouraged? Why do have so much pain? Without Jesus, the answer is horrifying. Your hedge is being trampled. You’re being overrun by the enemy. God isn’t tending to you. You are overrun by weeds. You’re dying of thirst, waiting for a single drop of rain to fall. But with Jesus, trouble is nothing more than a pruning knife in the hand of your loving Father. Your captivity in Babylon won’t last. He’ll bring you home; it’s just a matter of time. In the mean time, he’s bringing you face to face with a struggle that will show you his love in new ways. He’s opening your eyes, your ears, and your heart once again to your Baptism, to his Supper, to his Son, your Savior, so that he can grow still more beautiful, more wonderful fruit in you, fruit that lasts to eternal life. Come to the Communion table and listen to the Lord’s love song; there’s nothing sad about it: “This is my body, my blood, for you.”

There’s an old joke that says that when you sing a sad country-western love song backwards you get back everything you lost: your girlfriend, your pickup, your runaway dog. If only Isaiah’s sad song were so easy to fix. It took the death and resurrection of God’s Son in the flesh to restore what we had lost. Jesus has come. He has put a new song in our hearts and our lips, the song of his forgiveness, and we don’t have to wait until heaven to start singing it.

 Your song is in your service to others, service freely given with a smile only your Savior could have put on your face and in your heart. Your song is in your patience for trouble and suffering, patience only the faithful love of your Savior could have given you. As vines, none of us could ever have borne the fruit our Creator desires, because we are sinners. Jesus turns the sad song of Isaiah into a song of joy for time and eternity: He is the Vine; we are the branches; in him we will bear much fruit. Amen.