

Sermon Proper 22 Year A 2017

Isaiah 5:1-7

Psalms 80:7-14

Philippians 3:4b-14

Matthew 21:33-46

Bill Watson

October 8, 2017

Our lessons from Isaiah and Mt. are connected through the imagery of the vineyard. The timing of our lessons couldn't be more appropriate given the Fall harvests taking place in vineyards. But our lessons aren't just connected by the vineyard imagery but by the expectations of the vineyard owner in both instances. In Isaiah, we learn that the "vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the people of Judah are his pleasant planting;" But alas, God does not receive from the people what he had hoped. "He expected justice, but saw bloodshed; righteousness but heard a cry." (These words bring to mind echoes of the horror of last Sunday evening in Las Vegas.)

Then in the gospel lesson Jesus tells another story involving a vineyard. Let's remember the context which takes us back to last Sunday. This lesson is the second of three responses to the religious authorities who had been sent to question Jesus' authority following his cleansing of the Temple. They had asked him, "By what authority are you doing these things?" Jesus responded by asking them a question in return. He asked them the question of authority associated with the baptism announced by the prophet John the Baptist. When the authorities refused to answer Jesus' question, he responded with three parables set in vineyards, the first of which we heard last week.

Jesus moved from the question of his authority to stories/parables of the vineyard. These stories are about more than a vineyard though, as the vineyard owner is really God. And those in the vineyard, folks like you and me have not given God what God expects. Perhaps this happens when we fail to understand our place in the vineyard, fail to appreciate that we are mere tenants and that everything around us is a gift.

This has been a particularly moving week on many levels. Several things took place that have impacted my reflection upon our lessons. On Wednesday, October 4, we observed the Feast of St. Francis of Assisi. Francis in his life and

witness has much he can teach us. Part of his life story connects well with the images carried in our lessons this morning.

Francis was born into wealth but renounced it all. He embraced a life of poverty, prayer and good works. And in so doing, he developed a different perspective on life and the world. In renouncing possessions, he discovered an enduring connection with all of creation.

Francis came to appreciate the divine image in every aspect of creation, in people, in animals, even in other elements of creation such as the sun and moon, etc. Everything was suffused by this divine love and connection. Francis was comfortable in an environment of absolute poverty, one that we would find very limiting, because he experienced it all as filled to the brim with the love of God. He lacked nothing because he realized what was truly of value. So, he greeted everyone he met with respect and dignity.

Francis realized the intrinsic value and worth, the divinity of every aspect of creation. For Francis, everyone and everything revealed the divine image. Rather than seeing the elements of creation as something to be owned, expended, profited from, or controlled, Francis recognized a divine connection. Alas, appreciating or seeing that the divine image is really present in everyone we meet, is asking a lot.

Today, in this nation we are having real difficulty seeing or appreciating the divine image in others. We have a long way to grow in faith, it seems. Life and faith are all about connection and relationship. The stories of the vineyard are really stories of connection. How we are connected to one another? Faith without connection and community is merely a vague sort of spirituality. But Christians and for that matter Jews and Muslims as well understand faith to be lived out in relationship. Faith is really about connection to God and to one another.

This week was Centra Health System's annual pastoral care conference. Connection was the theme of the conference which focused on Family Systems Theory. This is a systems way of thinking about relationships not just in families but in any communal setting, including churches, offices, or homes. The theory seeks to understand the developmental influences on human relationships. One way into this theory is through understanding growth and development leading to emotional maturity.

How does it work? As an infant we are complete connection. We are totally dependent and connected. And as we grow, we develop a sense of our own separateness and independence which we refer to as autonomy. Think of this as a

continuum. Over here (right hand) is connection moving all the way over here (to the left) which is complete autonomy.

Over the course of our lives we move toward autonomy. At the age of two a child learns to say “No.” This is an early attempt at autonomy, expressing themselves distinct from their parents. And this process continues. Teenagers in their wisdom move off in independent directions. Parenting is no easy task as parents provide connection and support and at the same time allow movement towards autonomy and maturity. Too much hovering and connection can slow the process. This work towards autonomy has suffered some in recent years and autonomy is occurring later but it still happens.

This continuum of connection to autonomy is always present. And it has far reaching effects. We grow up and move away from home, living on our own, but we still remain connected to our parents and siblings even as we form families of our own.

And it is more complicated and effects how we relate to other aspects of our culture, even politics and religion. Faith hopes that in this process of developing autonomy, maturity, reaching adulthood, that we won't lose track of our sense of connection. Because connection remains in a sense the ground of our being. Connection with family, with God, and with humanity. We are not created to be solitary beings. Even Francis in his ascetic life lived and attracted many people around him in monastic community. The challenge of adulthood is to be our own selves and yet remain deeply connected to one another and to God.

In the parable of the vineyard, the workers experienced a failure of connection. They wanted to be fully autonomous. Not seeing the vineyard owner allowed them to lose track of the order of relationships within creation, to want something different. To want to be autonomous and in charge. To be owners in their own right.

The fruit of the vineyard like all of creation is brought about with our help for sure but undergirding all of creation is the complex and mysterious creative activity of the love of God. We may possess elements of the vineyard or even the whole vineyard for a time. While we may own it for a time, we are still just stewards.

Autonomy and connection and the tension between the two are elements through every aspect of our lives. We yearn for independence and autonomy while

staying connected to what is of value. Relationship with God and one another, the people whom God has drawn into our lives.

So what does God expect of us in these relationships? Scripture lays out God's expectations over and over with slightly different tones. This morning we heard Isaiah say that God hopes for justice and righteousness.

Or in the vineyard parables, the owner of the vineyard expects righteous living, human caring, and courageous witnessing. That is Matthew's understanding of what God expects. For Matthew, righteousness is behavioral. Pursuing righteousness is following Jesus, submitting to God and welcoming the reign of God. The Pharisees on the other hand feign religiosity but don't practice righteousness.

Each of these descriptions of God's expectations involves connection. We must know not just who we are but whose we are. And in learning to differentiate ourselves, discover that we are in fact connected to something greater than ourselves. And that connection is a divine one. Our divine connection has tangible qualities as each of us bears the image of God, we have the ability to represent or reveal something of God.

In order to live into God's expectation for righteous living, it helps if we can recognize or appreciate the divine image in others. One aspect of The Rev. Dr. MLK's work was about helping people appreciate this divine connection that exists between us all, no matter the differences which may seem more apparent. Preaching in 1957, King said, "Within the best of us, there is some evil, and within the worst of us, there is some good. When we come to see this, we take a different attitude toward individuals. The person who hates you most has some good in him; even the nation who hates you most has some good in it; even the race that hates you most has some good in it. And when you come to the point that you look in the face of every person and see deep down within what religion calls "the image of God," you begin to love in spite of. No matter what the person does, you see God's image there." (Martin Luther King, Jr., "Loving Your Enemies," a sermon preached at Dexter Ave. Baptist Church, 1957).

Our task is to appreciate how deeply we are connected to one another and to recognize the divine image in others.

We so want to be independent, autonomous and in full control. And yet, God has created us for just the opposite. God would have us see our connection to one another. And realize what a gift that is. Then recognizing that we all bear this

divine image and have a deep connection, may just bring forth a life characterized by justice and righteousness.