

The Vineyard of Sour Grapes

Isaiah 5:1-7

Sermon by Mark Schloneger

August 18, 2019

*I will sing for the one I love
a song about his vineyard:
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.
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.*

*“Now you dwellers in Jerusalem and people of Judah,
judge between me and my vineyard.
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?
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.
I will make it a wasteland,
neither pruned nor cultivated,
and briars and thorns will grow there.
I will command the clouds
not to rain on it.”*

*The vineyard of the Lord Almighty
is the nation of Israel,
and the people of Judah
are the vines he delighted in.
And he looked for justice, but saw bloodshed;
for righteousness, but heard cries of distress. (Isaiah 5:1-7)*

The history of Goshen, Indiana, according to Wikipedia:¹

Goshen was platted in 1831.

¹ Wikipedia contributors, "Goshen, Indiana," *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*.
https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Goshen,_Indiana&oldid=909182100 (accessed August 14, 2019).

It was named after the Land of Goshen
[the place in the Bible that the Egyptian pharaoh of Joseph gave to the Hebrews].
The initial settlers consisted entirely of old stock “Yankee” immigrants,
who were descended from the English Puritans who settled New England in the 1600s.
The New England Yankee population that founded towns such as Goshen
considered themselves the “chosen people” and identified with the Israelites of the Old Testament.
[They] thought of North America as their Canaan.

The Yankee migration to Indiana was a result of several factors,
one of which was the overpopulation of New England.
As a result, there was not enough land for every family to have a self-sustaining farm,
and Yankee settlers began leaving New England for the Midwestern United States.

They were aided in this effort by the construction and completion of the Erie Canal,
which made traveling to the region much easier.
Added to this was the end of the Black Hawk War,
which made the region much safer to travel and settle in for white settlers.
These settlers were primarily members of the Congregational Church,
though due to the Second Great Awakening,
many of them had converted to Methodism,
and some had become Baptists before coming to what is now Indiana.
When the New Englanders arrived in what is now Elkhart County,
there was nothing but dense virgin forest and wild prairie.
They laid out farms, constructed roads, erected government buildings and established post routes.

From here, Wikipedia’s history of Goshen jumps to the Palm Sunday tornadoes of 1965.²

(Pause)

“When the New Englanders arrived in what is now Elkhart County,
there was nothing but dense virgin forest and wild prairie.”

Did you hear what you didn’t hear?
The land upon which we gather this morning,
the soil upon which this building rests,
was originally inhabited by the Peoria, Miami, and Potawatomi peoples.
One account of an early white settler in Elkhart County said that when he arrived,
the prairie was dotted with wigwams of the Potawatomi.³

² *Ibid.* Following this sermon, this Wikipedia entry was edited to better reflect the Native American history and presence in the land that later became Goshen, Indiana.

³ Henry S.K. Bartholemew, “Some Early Settlements, Elkhart County, Indiana. *Pioneer History of Elkhart County.*
<http://history.rays-place.com/in/elk-settlements.htm>

But you wouldn't know that from the history of Goshen, according to Wikipedia.

You wouldn't know anything of the culture, the language, the customs of the indigenous peoples. And you wouldn't know anything about the exploitation, the oppression, the violence, that erased their presence from the land.

This erased history is buried in the soil upon which we build our houses, educate our children, make our living, and worship on Sunday mornings.

The white settlers that founded towns such as Goshen considered themselves the "chosen people" and identified with the Israelites.

It's ironic, isn't it?

It's to those people, the people of Israel and Judah, that the prophet Isaiah said these words:

*The Lord looked for justice, but saw bloodshed,
for righteousness, but heard cries of distress.*

I spent some time this morning talking about Wikipedia's warped account of Goshen's history not to inspire guilt, not to cause shame, but to position ourselves accurately before the words of the prophet Isaiah.'

That's because what was happening in Israel and Judah at the time when the prophet Isaiah began his work isn't that different from the omitted history that I just told you. Israel's and Judah's wealthy elites wanted farmland, and they manipulated and exploited subsistence farmers to acquire it. Who would speak for the ones who were being erased?

In the eighth century B.C.E, Israel and Judah saw an increase in international trade. It was a time when Israel's and Judah's leaders were importing luxury goods, military equipment, and building materials for large public structures. To pay for these imports, they exported wheat, olive oil, and wine.

And the more they depended on international trade, the more these powerful elites looked to consolidate control over agricultural production. Little by little, through oppressive taxes, high interest loans that led to foreclosure, and a legal system that benefited the powerful, the ruling, urban elites acquired the holdings of peasant farmers and consolidated them to make large vineyards and fields. The peasant farmers, meanwhile, became indentured servants working the land they formerly owned for the profit of the powerful.

You know, it's not all that different from the plight of the small farmer in the United States. And it's eerily similar to the story I read in *the Atlantic* this past week about how 98 percent of black agricultural landowners in America lost their farmland, millions of acres, across the South during the last century

through economic forces, racism and white economic and political power. Today, most of that land is owned by multinational corporations.⁴

Isaiah, chapter 3, verses 12 to 15, speaks of realities like these.

*Oppressors treat my people cruelly;
creditors rule over them.
My people's leaders mislead them;
they give you confusing directions.
The Lord takes his position to judge;
he stands up to pass sentence on his people.*

*The Lord comes to pronounce judgment
on the leaders of his people and their officials.
He says, "It is you who have ruined the vineyard!
You have stashed in your houses what you have stolen from the poor.
Why do you crush my people
and grind the faces of the poor?"
The sovereign Lord has spoken. (Isaiah 3:12-15)*

Or consider the verses just after following verses this morning:

*Woe to you who add house to house
and join field to field
till no space is left
and you live alone in the land.*

*The Lord Almighty has declared in my hearing:
Surely the great houses will become desolate,
the fine mansions left without occupants.*

The injustice that enabled the consolidation of farmland to build vineyards and large fields formed the context of Isaiah's work as a prophet, and so his song of the vineyard was not a neutral metaphor. It was aimed squarely at the ruling elites of Israel and Judah who were constructing large vineyards across fields of subsistence farmers who previously planted mixed crops to avoid risk.

*"I will sing for the one I love,
a song about his vineyard.
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.
He built a watchtower in it,
and cut a winepress as well.*

⁴ Van R. Newkirk, "The Great Land Robbery," *The Atlantic*, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2019/09/this-land-was-our-land/594742/> (accessed August 16, 2019).

*Then he looked for a crop of good grapes,
but it yielded only bad fruit."*

Because of that,
the vineyard will be destroyed, Isaiah declared.

*For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts,
is the house of Israel,
and the people of Judah
are his pleasant planting.*

*The Lord looked for justice, but saw bloodshed,
for righteousness, but heard cries of distress.*

These words are aimed at those who use their power to exploit the poor and the vulnerable.
God's people are to produce fruits of justice and righteousness,
in-the-flesh enactments of God's shalom.

If we want to become the people that God created us to be,
we can't remove ourselves from the gaze of prophets crying out for justice.
And the truth is, we who are here this morning are entangled in the actions that the prophets decried.
We can't avoid it.
Our purchases, our payment of taxes, our banking, our investments, our votes,
our very presence on this land,
entangle us in injustice that, try as we might, won't be erased.

So what do we do with that?
What do we do with the history of the land upon which we stand,
the economic, government, and legal systems that we depend on yet are fallen and unjust?

Well, I think we begin by telling the truth.

As a church, we tell truthful stories about our brokenness,
truthful stories about the world's brokenness,
so that we can proclaim and live a better story.

Unless we tell the truth, we will perpetuate the sin, the injustice,
that is buried beneath the myths that we tell about ourselves and our country.

When tell the truth about ourselves, and our world,
we are then free to live a better story.

We can never disentangle ourselves completely --
the powers and principalities are fallen --
but in Christ, we are able to live a better story,
we are able to work to unsettle ourselves from systems and histories of injustice
and re-place ourselves in right relationships, righteousness.
We are able to learn how we came upon this land,

tell that history, and,
when possible,
and seek relationships and partnerships with indigenous peoples.

I like how one person described what justice looks like in action.

Doing justice can be as simple, and as humbling, as being willing to see and name what is in front of our noses, asking for help, and then watching justice roll.

Doing justice can be as hard, and as liberating, as being willing to act like we believe that following God's will to resist evil is safer than following our will to preserve our own skin at all costs.

Doing justice is to always affirm with the early church that Jesus is Lord—and Caesar isn't.⁵

And, as Elie Wiesel wrote, "Silence in the face of oppression is to side with the oppressor."

In light of Jesus, in light of his life, death, and resurrection, we are free, free to claim our identity in a world where God's kingdom has come, and is coming, on earth as it is in heaven.

We are free to live a better story.

After all. the world cannot know of its brokenness and hopelessness unless a people exist who show an alternative way of life.

The world cannot know that there is an alternative to violence, to war, unless a people living in peace work at making peace

The world cannot know that the weak and the vulnerable are cared for by God, unless there is a people that practice a different sort of economy.

The world cannot know that the race to consume and acquire is not the way God intended human beings to live unless there is a people that keeps the Sabbath and practices simplicity as a discipline.

The world cannot know the unsurpassable worth of human life without a people who consistently work to protect it.

The world cannot know that it is broken and becoming dismembered, unless there is a people that gathers at the table frequently and re-members the Body of Christ.

The world cannot know that there's a wideness in God's mercy,
without a people willing to extend the wideness of God's mercy.

In Isaiah, the song of the vineyard doesn't end with our verses from chapter 5.

No, Isaiah, chapter 27, the song continues.

On that day,

"Sing, about a fruitful vineyard:

I, the Lord, watch over it;

I water it continually.

I guard it day and night

so that no one may harm it.

I am not angry.

⁵ Peter Vander Meulen, *Worship Is: Working for Justice*. <https://www.reformedworship.org/article/june-2014/worship-working-justice>

let it come to me for refuge;
let it make peace with me,
yes, let it make peace with me.”
In days to come Jacob will take root,
Israel will bud and blossom
and fill all the world with fruit. (Isaiah 27:2-6)

“I am the vine; you are the branches,” Jesus said. “If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. “ (John 15:5).