

What Grows in Your Vineyard?

The scriptures for today made me think about the vineyards, just over the Blue Ridge along Virginia Rte. 674, and along Rte. 9 as you travel east into Hillsboro. The vines that have not already been harvested are heavy with fruit, and their rich, dark colors show jewel-like in the sun. The lines of vines make beautiful patterns against the hills in the background. When I pass them on the way to church, I remember that they were not only important to our spiritual ancestors as food and drink, but also as a symbol of spiritual well-being.

In the First Book of Kings, the 21st chapter tells of how King Ahaz so covets the land of his neighbor Naboth that he says he will give him whatever he wants for it. But Naboth cares more about the vineyard growing on the land, which represents to him a tribal and ancestral inheritance. He will not sell. Jezebel, the wife of Ahaz, has Naboth killed so that Ahaz can have the land. This is the first scriptural indication that a vineyard is of great value, so much so that the owner would not sell it.

In the 24th chapter of the book of Deuteronomy, people who own vineyards are told not to go over the vines a second time, but to "...leave what remains for the alien, the fatherless, and the widow." The vineyard represents generosity and moral concern for others, as well as fecundity and wealth.

In one of the most famous vineyard passages, today's lectionary reading from the Hebrew scriptures, the prophet Isaiah uses the vineyard as a metaphor for the people of Judah, and tells them that the vineyard—that is, their life in community as believers in God—is producing only sour grapes, and will be destroyed. The "pleasant planting" has not borne the fruit God hoped for—a faithful people.

The psalmist asks God to restore favor, again using the vineyard as a metaphor for the nation. "Behold and tend this vine. Preserve what your right hand has planted."

In today's gospel, Jesus tells a parable (which also appears in Mark 12, verses 1-12) about a vineyard owned by someone who leases it to tenants. He sends a series of messengers to collect the rent due, all of whom are killed by the people who are tenants. He sends his son, finally, and the tenants kill him, too. Jesus tells his disciples that the Kingdom of God, which the vineyard represents, will be given to people who will take care of it. The son—that is, himself—is the stone that the builders rejected. In the Gospel of John, Jesus tells his followers, "I am the vine; you are the branches."

In the time following the death and resurrection of Jesus, his followers saw Jesus as that vine, and sought to bear good fruit. Paul says, "I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection, and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead...Christ Jesus has made me his own..." Paul put a lot of emphasis on the death of Jesus, and his subsequent resurrection. I have been asking myself, and especially given the nature of the time through which we are living: what kind of fruit grows in my spiritual vineyard? Does it nourish, does it quench thirst, does it truly represent the generosity and abundance of God?

Or: does it set people's teeth on edge? Does it represent the Kingdom, or does it reflect the worst of the times in which we live?

I hear a lot of moaning and fear from healthy and stable people. Some of those people say that we are in the end times predicted in the Book of Revelation, and, in a sense, blame God for what we are experiencing: fire, flood, famine, plague, mass migrations to avoid famine and war, and people everywhere at odds with each other. It is amazing to me that those people do not consider how we have treated the planet, which our scriptures tell us God gave us to love and care for. Actions—or lack thereof—have consequences.

I do not believe that the book of Revelation was written about the time in which we are living, and I believe that it is our own fault that the planet God gave us is telling us in the only language it has that we need to take a different direction. But, for a moment, let us suppose that St. John the Divine was given a vision not of Rome (which I believe was the subject of the visions in that remarkable document) but rather of our time, and what is happening now. Let us imagine, for the purposes of prayer and discernment, that we are living in the end times.

What is growing in my vineyard? If I call myself a Christian, am I living out the life of someone who is a branch of the love, the sacrifice and the devoted faithfulness that Jesus exemplified, and which he exhorted us to embody in the Beatitudes, the Great Commandment, and the Great Commission? Paul says that he lived out the life of a righteous Jew, but he became convinced that the life he had lived was loss, because he has sought to gain Christ.

In this supposition, we may examine our own lives faithfully, and look to see where Jesus would ask us to do better, "because Christ Jesus has made me his own," as Paul said. Now, let go of the supposition that we are living in the end times, and acknowledge that every single day is the end times for someone, and today could be the end times for me.

How am I going to live joyfully in Jesus Christ, as I walk towards my inevitable physical death? Do I do what Jesus indicates brings one to eternal life with him? Where can I look in new directions to live out my baptismal covenant? Where do I need to seek forgiveness or make amends. What part of God's creation gives me joy, and how do I take care of it? As the bumper sticker asks, "If I were on trial for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict me?"

The fact is that someone who tries to follow Jesus lives every moment as a follower, and a transformed life is part of the Good News. The Good News is not just that Jesus died and was resurrected. The Good News includes the reality that he gave us a model of love and action for the time we spend on earth. May each of us check our vineyards, to see what kind of grapes are growing there.

AMEN.