

Today, I would like us to give our time to the Song of the Vineyard in Isaiah 5. And I want to talk about the fruit of our lives as God's people—two specific areas of fruitful growth. And we will build on last week's sermon based on Philippians 2. I am sure you remember.

In our text, the song is clear. The vineyard is the people of God. And the song is all about the product of their lives. It is as Isaiah says at the end, "For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah are his pleasant planting." What a wonderful image of the identity of the people of God. Think of the Church as God's vineyard—a vineyard that He tends—a vineyard that produces His fruit.

The Prophet Amos—a contemporary of Isaiah in the 8th century BC—spoke of the final restoration of God's people in terms of a vineyard. It was a sign of God's restoration and blessing for His people.

In words that remind us of Eden and human flourishing, the Lord declares, "Behold, the days are coming when the plowman shall overtake the reaper and the treader of grapes him who sows the seed; the mountains shall drip sweet wine, and all the hills shall flow with it. I will restore the fortunes of my people Israel, and they shall rebuild the ruined cities and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and drink their wine, and they shall make gardens and eat their fruit. I will plant them on their land, and they shall never again be uprooted out of the land that I have given them."

In ancient Israel, vineyards were important and highly prized. They took a great deal of preparation and care. The land must first be cleared—of trees and rocks. The best vines are selected with care. A tower is built for protection. A place to process, store, and age wine is created. And the vineyard owner fertilizes and waters and tends the vineyard. And when all is done, the vineyard owner expects a sweet harvest.

But now, Isaiah's whole song goes off the rails. The Prophet concludes, "And he looked for it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes." Another translation reads, "Then he waited for a harvest of sweet grapes, but the grapes that grew were wild and sour." The term that Isaiah uses here means *wild*, *sour*, *stinking* and *worthless*.

It is easy to imagine Isaiah's first hearers enjoying the metaphor—and their privileged place within it. And it is also easy to imagine their shock when they are told that for all that effort, the outcome is only bitter, stinking, sour, worthless grapes. And then the hearers suddenly realize Isaiah is talking about them. It is their lives that he confronts with this song. They find themselves under the judgment of God.

If we were to keep reading in Isaiah 5, Isaiah gets specific about the fruit that he condemns. At the end of our reading, he says, "He looked for justice, but behold, bloodshed; for righteousness, but behold, an outcry!" As you can imagine, these words sound much alike in Hebrew—justice and bloodshed—righteousness and outcry. Isaiah underlines the contrast between what was expected and what was actually produced.

There are five specific behaviors outlined in the rest of the chapter. And each is introduced by the word *woe*. This is a word of lament and warning. It is used to express

sorrow, regret, and anger. The *woes* describe the sins of the people in relation to the kind of lives God had called them to live at Sinai.

These sins are not so different than the world we see around us today—greed, self-indulgence, pride, moral perversion, and social criticism. Maybe we even struggle with such things ourselves. At their core, it is a confusion of God’s will with our own opinions.

Listen to Isaiah as he continues, “Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter! Woe to those who are wise in their own eyes, and shrewd in their own sight! Woe to those who are heroes at drinking wine, and valiant men in mixing strong drink.”

Clearly, the people feel as if they can live however they want—and still expect God’s blessings. They think they can avoid consequences because they identify as the people of God.

But Isaiah is saying that is foolish. There are real consequences for our poor choices—when we rebel against God’s purposes for us. Just as the vineyard of wild grapes will be destroyed because of what it produced—Israel would also bring destruction upon themselves for their rebellion.

The issue at hand is as new as today—and as old as time. It is this question: Is there any meaning to life outside of the meaning I give it? Our culture has come to the nearly unified conclusion that there is not. And the implications of this conclusion are all around us.

But God has another purpose for us. The point here is that we do not belong to ourselves. We are God’s workmanship. St. Paul says it well in Ephesians 2, “We are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.”

God has purposes for us—and for our lives. To define life for ourselves—to live by our own passions—undermines His direction. And ultimately, it leads to heartache, disappointment, and spiritual apathy.

I appreciate that the Scriptures again and again draw us to consider the fruit of our lives. It fits well with the illustration of a vineyard. We are rarely called to assess the fruit of the lives of others—except when it comes to false teachers. But we are called to look at our own. We are very practiced at criticism—we are not very practiced at self-criticism.

Social media is perhaps the most glaring example of this. Just look at the way we criticize and make demands of others—without actually doing anything helpful ourselves. We can achieve the same at the local coffee shop on Monday morning or at the bar on Friday night.

We criticize government, the church, the referees, the neighbors, our own families—and especially those of the other political persuasion. For some, the only fruit of our lives is criticism. We never actually do anything beneficial for the church or world. We live without any godly fruit at all.

If we want to thrive as a congregation—if we want to grow and be vibrant as God’s people—this is a good place to start. I want to offer us two areas of growth today—related to our passage. But let’s begin with our words.

Last week, we talked a little about grumbling, complaining, and arguing. Obviously these are not virtues. They are not what God would have for us as His people. Criticism is not a spiritual gift.

Philippians 2 was our text. But notice the connection Paul makes between grumbling and our witness in the world, “Do all things without grumbling or questioning, that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world.”

Do all things without grumbling, complaining, questioning, and arguing. Not just because it is good for us—although it is—not just because it protects others—and it does—but as part of our witness to the world.

Often we think of our witness in the world along the lines of marketing and programs. But Paul has a different place for us to start. At work, at home, and especially at Church—stop grumbling and complaining and criticizing.

I like the way Paul says it on Ephesians 4, “Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear. “

Let’s practice putting the best construction on the actions of others. Work on your own life—your own words—your own conversations. And in this way, live as servants caring for one another. As Paul says, “Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus.”

When we share the mind of Christ—the perspective of Christ—the words of Christ—and what a blessing that is—the world will notice soon enough. I like the way Jesus says it in John 13, “By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

A couple of summers ago, we gave our Wednesday services to the topic of the fruit of the Spirit. It is probably my favorite sermon series ever at St. John. In Galatians 5, we hear, “The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace—patience, kindness, goodness—faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.”

This is the life that God has for us. This is the fruit that God wants to flourish among us as His Church. And love is the first and primary fruit that Paul has for us. And the way that we talk about one another—the way that we talk to one another—not only meets needs—it is our witness in the world.

That’s the reputation that will bring growth—or at least the kind of growth that we should be looking for—Christian maturity, faithfulness, love—these are things that we are to be before the world.

Let me offer a second area of growth—a second fruit that will also bring growth. And this is also about our life together in the Church. And it arises naturally from Isaiah 5.

In Ephesians 5, Paul speaks about “the fruit of light.” And he tells us it is “found in all that is good and right and true.” And then he says, “Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with all your heart.”

If you want to see your Church grow—if you want to grow as a Christian—sing. Sing the hymns, the canticles, the liturgy. Sing during Holy Communion. Sing the faith into your hearts. Singing engages your brain differently than listening or speaking. It is why we can remember songs even when we can't remember last week's sermon—although you should remember that too.

We are going to get to know our hymns better this next Church Year as a congregational emphasis and in our private devotions. I'll talk more about this down the road.

But think about your singing as something that benefits and supports each other in the pew. And it is also our witness to guests. We believe what we sing. Our hymns are carefully chosen for their rich theological content. We sing the best lyrics of any Church body out there—the best of all of Church history. Let's sing like we mean it.

But, Pastor, I don't sing very well. Well, neither do I. Sing anyway. Just in case you are not sure, the Bible contains over fifty direct commands to sing. And the Bible mentions singing more than four hundred times. Let your singing on Sunday morning arise out of the grace that He has worked in your life.

In the Small Catechism, Luther details all of the blessings of body and soul that God provides as first article gifts. He then concludes, "All this He does only out of fatherly, divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness in me. For all this it is my duty to thank and praise, serve and obey Him." This is the fruitful life that God has for us. And the world will notice when we sing like we mean it.

Isaiah's Song of the Vinyard. That's our text today. The Church is His vineyard. And we are looking for maturity and growth. Let's produce grapes rather than sour grapes.

Let's make a change—when it comes to grumbling, complaining, and arguing with one another. And let's sing with the Church—boldly and robustly—because we recognize God's command—and His work among us—as we put His words on our lips. Let's be a Church marked by compassion for one another. And let's be a Church that sings. Let such things be the beginning of our witness.

I have offered a lot of challenges over the years here at St. John. But when was the last time you truly changed something in your life—or something about your character? When was the last time you truly listened—and followed—and submitted to God's Word?

God has been at work among us. He has forgiven our sins. He has made us His people. Let's be who we are. The vineyard of the LORD of hosts. In the name of Jesus. Amen.

+Soli Deo Gloria+