

As we begin to delve into today's readings, I invite you to look at the beginning words in your bulletin. There we read:

Open a newspaper, turn on the TV, read online – everywhere we look, the world is crumbling about us. War, violence, natural disasters, hateful words, anger, and hostility litter our cultural landscape like so much garbage along a highway. Even within our own homes, sin, death, and the devil seem to have the upper hand. Anger, betrayal, mistrust, and manipulation hang rotting on the vine, rather than the lush, sweet grapes of love, care and forgiveness we expect and desire. And if we take but a moment for self-reflection, we notice that it is our own selfishness and hard-heartedness that contribute to this state of affairs. We are indeed “captive to sin and cannot free ourselves” as we confess in worship.

These words were not written this past week. They were written almost two years ago for this Sunday by a handful of leaders in our denomination as they formed and created ELCA resources for this church year. Yet, how fitting they are on this day as we reflect upon the events of this past week, let alone the events of these past few months and all that we have experienced. In fact, over the past week, following the massacre in Las Vegas, I have been feeling the weight and sadness these printed words express. They are timely words and they connect to our readings because today we hear something about judgement and lament.

In today's readings we hear a lot about vineyards, a metaphor used many times in both the Old Testament and the New Testament. We are

invited to consider the “vineyard” as God’s dominion and we, by virtue of our baptisms, are the tenants of the vineyard.

In our first reading, the prophet Isaiah begins by singing a love-song concerning his beloved’s vineyard. When looking at Isaiah’s words, I think he gains the attention of his listening audience when he begins to sing this love-song. And, like us, the people who listened to Isaiah’s song likely expected to hear of a ballad with a happy ending. Isaiah sings of how God, his beloved did everything possible to set up a healthy, thriving vineyard. He tells of how God spared no effort to create an environment conducive to success. The soil was fertile and cultivated; the stones were removed; only the finest quality vines were planted; a watchtower was built in the middle of the vineyard; and a wine vat was built in preparation for the harvesting and processing of the grapes. The love-song is most pleasant to the ears, and listeners’ heartstrings are touched by the nurturing care of the beloved. Yes, the prophet Isaiah is serenading us with such a beautiful love song.

But wait, before you fall asleep with these tender words; listen to what follows. As the iconic Gomer Pyle would say, “Surprise, surprise, surprise!” Isaiah’s love-song is transformed into song of hard-hitting judgement and lament. Maybe we can gain the sense of such an unpleasant surprise by thinking of the love-song as a gentle, bedtime lullaby which is suddenly

transformed into a condemning, raunchy, deafening heavy-metal rock-and-roll song.

In any case, the irony of the song comes to the forefront when Isaiah, speaking for God, asks the people of Jerusalem and Judah to “judge between me and my vineyard.” In other words, the people are asked to judge between God on the one side, and Jerusalem and Judah on the other. In an agonizing song of judgement and lament, God tells his people that there was nothing more God could do to guarantee the success of God’s own vineyard. God had done everything that could possibly be done. And, quite honestly, implied here in the song is the human freedom that God gives us. In the song, God the beloved expects the best from God’s people: “God expected it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes.” And, by the way, a more literal translation of “wild grapes” would be “stinking things.” So, the consequences of freedom being misused or abused is that a well-cared for vineyard becomes neglected and turns into a dried-out wasteland of briers and thorns and stinking things.

The concluding verse of the song makes it abundantly clear that the vineyard represents God’s chosen people. God expected and hoped the people would ensure that there was **justice** for everyone in the nation. Instead of justice, the wealthy class of politicians and business people were

killing society's weakest and most vulnerable citizens. Blood was on the hands of the rich and powerful members of society, since their wealth was gained by cheating and robbing society's poorest class. God expected and hoped for righteousness from God's very own people. Instead God heard a cry from the poor and oppressed. God expected God's own people to look after the poor and oppressed; after all, those who were now blessed with wealth and the good life – had they and their ancestors not cried out to the LORD when they were poor and oppressed slaves in Egypt? Had God not heard their cries and delivered them from Egyptian slavery? Why now had they abused their freedom and become selfish and greedy? They, with their blood money and ill-gotten riches were no better than their former enemy oppressors – the Egyptians.

In our day and age, has anything really changed? Don't we hear stories of injustice and ill-gotten gain today? Our planet is moaning and groaning due to the selfishness and greed of a minority of the world's population. 795 million people in this world experience hunger every day. Increasingly, hateful, venomous words are spoken to others as our words become weapons. Countless numbers of people are hurting following recent hurricanes and earthquakes. And, we have just experienced the

largest mass murder in our country. Do we hear the cries of suffering and how do we respond? Are we really a caring society?

God's love, care, and protection come with an expectation: **justice** and **righteousness**. These are the fruits God longs to see flourish in **us**. The blessings and nurture we receive are meant to result in **right social relationships**. Justice and righteousness are not things we practice for extra credit; they are the **main point**. God is **not** content until the blessings we receive are shared fairly with all. If this fruit is not produced, the consequences may be that God allows us to have our own way and leaves us to our own devices.

In today's gospel reading, Jesus borrows Isaiah's words when he tells the allegorical parable of the Wicked Tenants. God, the landowner, has called **us** to work in the vineyard of the world. But, we decide we want the fruits of the land for ourselves and we refuse to give back to God that which is rightfully God's. And we beat and mistreat and murder those who would call us to be responsible. And what does God the landowner do in response? God keeps sending servants, until finally God sends God's own Son, who also is mistreated and ultimately killed. But, the point of this story is that God goes to such great lengths for **us** because **God never gives up on us**. This is the amazing part of **Jesus'** story, and the part that is too

often missed. Like the crazy landowner in this parable, God is **constantly** working to establish a relationship with us and God never gives up, no matter how many servants are treated badly. And, that's the thing about God's grace – it isn't sensible, it isn't logical – it just abundantly is!

This parable Jesus tells is about the abundant and extravagant grace that God has for us! In this parable Jesus is illustrating how God goes to extravagant, excessive, even illogical and crazy extents to shower this love and grace upon us. And no matter how many times we reject God, God keeps at it. God keeps working on establishing a relationship with **us!**

So, as I continue to reflect upon the events of this past week, today's readings not only call me to repentance and grieve the evil in our present culture, they also remind me of a God who **never gives up on us**. The Son is continually redeeming creation and this God never lets us forget that **we** are the characters in God's divine love song. God is always showering us with immeasurable grace and love. And, as a tenant in the vineyard, I can only respond by working to bear good fruit. As people of faith, we respond to God's immeasurable grace by bearing the sweet grapes of love, care and forgiveness and letting God use us as we work for peace, righteousness, loving kindness, mercy and **God's** restorative justice for all.