

The Rev. Dr. Hilary B. Smith

Holy Comforter

Richmond, VA

August 14, 2016; the 13th Sunday after Pentecost

Readings: Isaiah 5:1-7; Psalm 80:1-2, 8-18; Hebrews 11:29-12:2; Luke 12:49-56.

God's Language of Love

While my main focus today will be on our reading from Isaiah, The Parable of the Vineyard, I must say something about the Gospel reading that we just heard. And the two are related...for they are both about God's love, the nature of God's love, and responses to God's love.

Jesus is here portrayed as angry, the angry one who brings division.

But this is more a descriptive passage about what has happened because of Jesus, that he lived, and Christians followed in his Way, more descriptive than a prediction about what will happen. We remember that everything we read in the Bible was written after the fact, with interpretation; it is not a newsreport ...not a live feed.

We gather here week in and week out and we talk about the love of God and the Way of God that Jesus walked and invites us to walk...to walk in love, to be about peace and justice. This Jesus seems not so peaceful. But those first Christians were feeling the stress of seeking to follow the way of Jesus in a world that doesn't always or even often like the way of Jesus...for example when the poor are given respect and honor and justice is sought them even if that means the very rich are a little less rich...not everyone likes this Jesus...and so division is the natural result.

I often think that if we are at peace with everyone, we are probably not walking in the Way of Jesus...we are probably not walking in step or close enough or opening ourselves to the closeness that God wants to have with us in mission to bring justice and peace to all people. Do we know how to interpret the present time so that we are able to align ourselves with God as we know God through Christ? And when we think of the present time, we think first of what is happening in the world around us...but also happening in our world all the time is God's life with us.

Faith may seem complicated. The Episcopal Church may seem complicated. For one who has never worshipped in a liturgical church, like ours or the RC church, worship itself can seem confusing...and what do we believe? People new to HoCo are often new to the Episcopal Church, and they ask me, "what does your church believe?" Well, here

in the middle of August, in the heat of the summer, this seems like a good time to get back to basics.

In the Ignatian tradition, spirituality...I spoke about St. Ignatius two weeks ago...how he turned from the riches of the world to serve God, to follow God...how did he do that? He had an experience of God's love that he then taught as the foundation of faith...this is back to basics...and it makes every other aspect of a life of faith possible... having the knowledge that God who created you, loves you, unconditionally ... before we get into anything else this is the most important thing to know...and we need to hear about that again and again because so much of life is difficult and so many aspects of life do not affirm our inherent beauty and worth and blessedness. The foundation of our lives...our lives of Spirit, in the Spirit...is our knowledge of God's great love for us...God's great love known through actions of creating us and providing everything we need for life through creation.

It is in this context, that the prophet Isaiah spoke of a love song, using a parable of a vineyard. Isaiah was using this parable to explain the suffering of the people during war in the 8th century...that it was their fault because of their behavior...that was the most common way of understanding suffering at that time...that God allowed it or even caused it because of the people's sins. This is not the only view expressed in the Bible...for example Job's suffering is not so easily explained. While we do not hold to Isaiah's way of understanding suffering as presented here, this parable of the vineyard has much to offer us as we consider God's love for us and our response.

The gardener, God, has given everything to nurture the vineyard...the vineyard is on a very fertile hill; the beloved dug it and cleared it of stones, planted it with the best vines; built a watchtower in the midst of it...he expected it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes...

judge for yourself, see, what more could the beloved had done for the vineyard. And based on the response... the lack of good fruit, the vineyard faces destruction.

Judge for yourself, see all that God has provided. God has provided everything for the vineyard. God has provided everything for us. What keeps people, perhaps us, from seeing all that God provides, how God cares for and loves us? Many things can block our view of God. Our culture that teaches us that we as individuals need to make things happen...focusing on what we can do...to the exclusion of looking to God, or giving God the credit.

But when we do hear the love-song of God's care for us...again knowing that foundational reality of God-for-us...the One who prepares the soil and clears the rocks...we are able to respond with gratitude. Joan Chittister says of gratitude, that it, "...is not only the posture of praise but it is also the basic element of real belief in God."¹ This is our summer-time back to basics opportunity...to consider that gratitude is the basic element of belief in God.

Isaiah is clear that the people to whom he is preaching are not responding with gratitude because they are not responding with justice and righteousness as expected, in fact they are responding with contempt.

There is a book written for couples entitled, *The 5 Love Languages*, by Gary Chapman...this is not a book about God, but I think it can help us think about how God loves us and how we can respond.² The premise of the book is that there are five primary ways that a person feels loved in relationships. Chapman is focusing on people who are married...in long-term committed monogamous relationships. For those whose marriages seem to be a struggle, this book gives some very practical tips about how to communicate love to a person whose primary love language might not be yours.

Love is more than a feeling. It is known through actions. God has acted...in the parable of the vineyard...we see God with the vines, in the vineyard, care for the vines. Quality time, giving gifts, acts of service, are three of the languages of love mentioned in the book.

What is God's language of love with you?
And what is your language of love with God?

When we can know the language of love God speaks to us, we can be grounded in that knowledge, and then respond.

God loves it when we respond.
God loves it when we show forth the fruit of God's love for us; God loves it when we are about justice and righteousness.

¹ Joan Chittister, *The Breath of the Soul: Reflections on Prayer*, New London, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 2009, p. 39.

² Gary Chapman, *The 5 Love Languages: The Secret to Love That Lasts*, Chicago:Northfield, ePub, 2015. Originally published in 1992.

I would like to leave you with an image...our children in children's chapel this summer have been considering where they have seen God...which is another way of recognizing God's language of love for them, for us.

During the opening ceremony of the Olympics, I saw God and perhaps how we as the human community responded and can respond to God, the goodness of life, with justice and righteousness. Amid all the athletes representing their countries with national colors and individual national flags, there was a small group with the olympic symbol on their little flags...they were, are, the refugees without a country...but for me, they represented humanity that can move beyond nationalism in a good way that values all people...seeing them there, in their sharp outfits and under the olympic flag, I saw God in them and they gave me hope that we can be God's good, fruitful vineyard.

Amen.