



Grace Lutheran Church, State College, PA
Rev. Carolyn K. Hetrick
The 18th Sunday after Pentecost, October 4, 2020
“Behold and Tend This Vine”
Sermon texts: Isaiah 5:1-7; Psalm 80:7-15;
Matthew 21:33-46

Lately we’ve been doing TV armchair travel, to faraway places like Borneo, home to a rare forest ecosystem found nowhere else- from giant primates and flying lizards to a tiny wooly bat who sleeps at night in a pitcher plant, safe because the plant is bat sized, and though poisonous to others, not poisonous to it. In our area, homing migratory song birds swirl on their way, singing loudly, joined by squirrels singing back as if in solidarity and encouragement. Little systems of life, corners of the kingdom, moving to a love song taught by a doting Creator who prepared, planted, and designed this home within which we are blessed to spend a season. “Let me sing a love-song for my beloved” the words of Isaiah burst forth, extols a labor of love making my heart burst.

This song of a vineyard is richer is you know about real grapevines. They don’t need perfect soil, but they do need soil well prepared for roots to spread and the vine to soar. It takes deep and abiding investment, connection to the land and three years to see a good first harvest. Hoping amidst watering, mulching, pruning, tending and training vines to capture just the right sun can culminate in harvests for generations. Creator and creation moving in concert- humans, insects, birds, the vine, and the elements. What more could God do that God did not do to set us up for this harvest?

Imagine God on hands and knees nurturing each task in love, caring for the greatest and the least. That’s God’s vision that Scripture calls justice and righteousness. That’s the framework God desires not only among those people of Israel, but among us in this season. Miraculously, we are given the gift of tending the vine. Untended and unloved, it becomes wild and woody, the crop shrinks and becomes bitter. The whole system of life suffers as all are intertwined. How you do or do not treat the vulnerable vine is a reflection of the state of your vineyard. You can choose to not care for the vines, or not care past this season, but then everyone reaps a very different harvest.

Imagine how you would feel if you created a labor of love for the greatest and the least, but those blessed to share in its gifts were apathetic about its decline, or worse, felt entitled to diminish it beyond today. Can you hear a heart bursting as the prophet speaks God's heartfelt concern? Those who disappoint are not outsiders, but those God chose, given creativity and license to steward the vineyard for the benefit of all.¹

They have failed to reflect God's justice as God's people. In our time, in a very real way, how are we treating the vines of the vineyard we call creation? Forest fires burning in places like the Amazon where land grabbers and wildcat ranchers transform lush rainforest, the lungs of the earth, into their own enterprises. Closer to home, land is giving way because of mining disasters and deep cracks from long term drought and water diverted are leaving those downstream to crumble. The news increasingly shows the vine is a devastation and a wreck, as people stand over the embers of what "they said could happen" that has. That's where our psalm starts, pleading, "Restore us, O Lord!"

We all in some way have failed to listen to or obey God's word when it has seemed inconvenient, pursuing our collective belief we can grab and own, use up and move on. Where we treat creation as disposable, we can treat people the same. When we abandon our God given vocation of caring, tending, safeguarding, cultivating and protecting, we fail to perpetuate God's vision of justice leaving so many vulnerable and entangled in this vine. It was true among the people of Israel, and the laborers of those faithless tenants and among us. We in the midst of the world's largest global migration in the history of the vineyard we share, due to scarcities of water and land and food, our own crops have lain flattened and wasted. All creation cries for restoration- "Behold Lord, tend this vine."

As we cry out, we can be tempted to imagine God as absent, uninvolved or apathetic, but we must question how only God or only someone else is to blame. Maybe some just wanted "theirs" while others of us felt too small to matter, and got swept along in what happens. Maybe God has achingly allowed us to experience our collective choices of tending our growing ego, self-serving, and partiality. These must be broken down like the walls they are. Nothing new will grow from them.

¹ "A Lament for the Vineyard," by Debbie Thomas. Journey with Jesus, September 27, 2020.

"What more could I have done?" brings us face to face with our own ugly truths we have not been ready to hear. They must be spoken for us to break open undying love and be restored.

From our tangle, we cry, "Restore us, O Lord" as the cry of the vulnerable, seeing that the vulnerable includes us. "Restore us" is a plea for restoration and new life and also a confession seeking forgiveness.

"Behold, Lord, tend this vine" feels more urgent.

David Attenborough whose films like BBC's "Planet Earth," depict the intricate, intimate and inexhaustible beauty of the hand of our Creator, recently begged us to see that the earth and all its creatures should be celebrated and cherished. And that we should see the world and our time in it as precious.

"The world is not a bowl of fruit in which we can just take what we wish. We are a part of it. If we destroy it, we destroy ourselves." Friends, the vine is sturdy, and the vine is fragile. "Behold, Lord, tend this vine."

Over and over the story of God with the people (including us) is of God lovingly providing, giving us room to grow. When we grow otherwise, we look around and see messiness and pain not loveliness and life, and ask how we got here. "Tend this vine" recognizes our smallness and frailty without God's guidance.

Thank God, that in the face of even our worst destructions, God never fails to show how deeply God wants to love us back to life, even loving us from the cross in the face of the unimaginable before bringing forth resurrection. Paul tell us we should lay aside all else we value for knowing and being known in this Christ, and elsewhere proclaims we are co-creators with God in birthing a new reality in Christ.

It is a blessed miracle to still be called to be faithful caretakers and proclaimers of God's holy and beautiful vineyard, as the body of Christ now. It calls to mind a poem from the anthology, "Wing Over Wing":

"Yesterday I heard a new sound above my head,
a rustling, ruffling quietness in the spring air
and when I turned my face upward
I saw a flock of blackbirds
rounding a curve I didn't know was there
and the sound was simply all those wings,
all those feathers against air, against gravity
and such a beautiful winning;

the whole flock taking a long, wide turn,
as if of one body and mind.
How do they *do* that?

If we lived only in human society
what a puny existence that would be
but instead we live and move and have our being
here, in this curving and soaring world
that is not our own
So when mercy and tenderness triumph in our lives
and when, even more rarely, we unite and move together
toward a common good,
we can think to ourselves:

Ah yes, this is how it's meant to be. ²

AMEN

² Julie Cadwallader Staub, "Blackbirds," *Wing Over Wing*, p. 7. Paraclete Press (2019).