

“Wild Grapes and Mothers in Law”
Presbyterian Church in Sudbury
Isaiah 5:1-7; Hebrews 11:29-12:2; Luke 12:49-56

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Confusing, distressing, disturbing. Those words describe my reaction to what we are about to hear in our Gospel lesson, in which we will hear Jesus say he has come, not to bring peace but division within families. Matthew uses the word sword instead of division. How do we understand words of families being divided against each other, spoken by the one we regard as the messenger of peace, unity, and reconciliation?

We know Matthew and Luke were writing in the latter part of the first century, well after Jesus' death and resurrection, and with his anticipated return not yet reality. At the time, Judaism was being oppressed by Rome. The Jerusalem temple had been destroyed. The threat was real and severe. Taking on the Roman military was not an option. To survive, you would follow Rome's rules. To survive, you sought ways to keep Jews unified. To keep unified, upstart groups had to be considered a threat. Matthew and Luke are writing to the upstart group of Jews who aligned themselves with Jesus as the Messiah. They were thus seen as a threat to the desired unity within the Jewish family.

In the context of this late first century reality of Jewish oppression by Rome, which extended to followers of Christ, Jesus' words will sound prophetic. He will speak of families divided within themselves – three against two and two against three. One can imagine Jesus is predicting the kind of reaction a son would receive after he attends a tent meeting with the Apostle Paul, comes home and declares he now believes in Jesus as the risen Messiah. Perhaps Gospel writer Luke has already known of situations where a daughter has thrown a family into fits when she announces the man she wants to marry is a Jesus follower, though in the first century women really did not make such choices on their own.

The family, the household, was the cornerstone of first century Jewish culture. The family was where one belonged and those to whom one returned. Family continues to occupy that place today, at least in our thoughts, so we wonder what Jesus could be saying to us in what we are about to hear. Let us listen to Jesus' words to what Luke has told us is a crowd of thousands, in Luke 12:49-56.

“I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed! Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division! From now on five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three; they will be divided: father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law.”

He also said to the crowds, “When you see a cloud rising in the west, you immediately say, ‘It is going to rain’; and so it happens. And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, ‘There will be scorching heat’; and it happens. You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?”

It has been over thirty years since I first met the Rev. Joe Prakasim from Durban, South Africa. He, and his wife Grace, came to Joplin, Missouri to work with our church for eight weeks during the summer of 1984. Of Indian origin, Joe would tell of Hindus who began attending his church, and then deciding to be baptized Christian. Joe would tell them, “No.” Well, he did not exactly deny the request, but suggested if wanting to convert from Hinduism to Christianity, one should wait a year. Why? Family. At least at that time, such a conversion would often mean one would be rejected and cast out by one’s Hindu family. Joe wanted them to be sure of their new faith, before they risked losing the support of their families.

Joe’s words come back to me when I read these words of Jesus. Family continues to be the cornerstone of societies. Bookstore shelves are full of offerings on father-son and mother-daughter relationships. Jesus also includes the live-in mother-in-law in the household, a relationship that in our society is more the brunt of jokes and subject of advice columns.

While having the mother-in-law present was perhaps the norm in first century households and the exception in our own culture, one way to hear the in-law relationship is as moving us beyond “our own,” for it involves not blood ties, but what one marries into. We know that differences in race, culture, religion, as well as “other side of the tracks” class distinctions have more than one caused the response, “You are marrying a what?” Not “who,” but “a what” based on how the fiancé’s class, race, or religion is different from “ours.”

Jesus is daring to intrude on the very heart of social stability. Then, as now, the family was seen to be the heart of culture. When asked what is most important in one’s life, few people answer, “My work is most important,” even if work dominates their time, attention, and energy. In surveys, peoples’ number one response for what is most important is relationships, with family and friends. Depending on how the question is asked, some will put God at the top of their list, but often “God and family” are uttered in a single breath, with a degree of inseparability.

What Jesus seems to be saying is his bringing of fire, a reference to the Holy Spirit which is central to Luke’s Gospel, is a call to, in our words, “put everything on the table,” including sacred institutions. As biblical scholar and professor Richard Carlson suggests, “Jesus has not come to validate human institutions and their values [– even family –], but to initiate God’s will.” [*Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol 3* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), p. 359]

While acknowledging the care and nurture one finds within families, Jesus would not subscribe to focusing on the family as the mark of faithfulness. When someone tells him his own family has come, Jesus asks, “Who is my mother and who are my brothers?” Even the role of family is to be questioned if it is simply maintaining the status quo. One’s primary responsibility is not the relationships with those who share blood or marital ties, but the relationship with the one who is risking his life out of a commitment to extend mercy, compassion, and justice to and for the broader family of the outcast, the alien, and the rejected.

So, we discover our Gospel lesson is not really about interfaith or cross-cultural marriage, but Jesus' call for justice and equality to become family members. Carlson suggests this lesson offers an "agenda that will result in divisions and contentions on all levels of society, as people are either embraced or repelled by what God is doing through Jesus. ... It is the agenda that causes us to reinterpret what God is truly about in the person of Jesus, and ... who we are and what we are about as disciples of Jesus." [Ibid, p. 363]

I would invite us now to imagine carrying with us this agenda, this commitment not to pass along blind validation of any human institution, as we enter the vineyard of the Isaiah passage we read together. The prophet's song uplifts God's care for the vineyard, God's own people. We enter the vineyard as those whose agenda is ever being spirited into life by Jesus and his teachings.

As I thought of entering this vineyard I thought about how we search for homes to buy. In pre-computer days, real estate agents had printed multi-listing books, with descriptions of homes, and perhaps a few black and white pictures. Now, all listings are online, with color pictures. One can also use "street view" to see how the house looked on the random day the Google car-cam drove by, and whether the folks across the street maintain their homes and yard or keep an old washing machine on the front porch. Some listings even offer what is called a "virtual tour," a mini-video that escorts you through the home. These are often homes into which one can immediately move and unpack.

Another set of homes are described as "needing some updating" or "add your special touch to make this home your own." Generally this means the walls are covered with wallpaper from a half century ago, or the appliance colors are coppertone or turquoise. Pictures of these homes usually do not highlight what needs updating.

Then, there are the house listings with just a single picture, often taken from a distance. In the written description, one reads phrases like, "fixer-upper," "handywoman's special," or "contractors take notice." There may be a note the Title V inspection has failed, a critical piece of information if you hope to take a shower or flush the toilet. What once might have been a very nice house is now being sold with the disclaimer, "as-is." "As is" means our neglect is now your opportunity.

As we enter the vineyard about which Isaiah writes, we find an "as is" property. What was created and planted with choice vines on a fertile hill, with the protection of hedge and watchtower, has now fallen into ruin. The yield is wild grapes, or as another translations puts it, rotten grapes. Wild, rotten, sour grapes.

Isaiah solves any mystery about what the vineyard image means. It is God who is the vintner, the planter, and God's beloved people, Israel and Judah, are the vineyard plantings. It is God who painstakingly created and watered the vineyard, and then entrusted it, deeded it, with love, to the people. Yet, when God tasted the grapes the people yielded, they were wild grapes, rotten grapes, and God asks, "what more could I have done?"

There is an unpleasantness in biting into a fruit one expects to be sweet and it is not. For God, it goes beyond unpleasant. God's anger is defined in the verses following our passage, when Israel and Judah are chastised for joining fields together to squeeze out or sequester the poor. This gives context to the end of our reading, where the failure to produce justice and righteousness are the given cause of the grapes' wild, rotten taste in God's mouth.

Yet, planted deeper in the soil of the vineyard God envisioned and created out of love, is what Karl Barth called the "impossible possibility" of this text. The term "impossible possibility" is captured when we respond to something by saying, "How could they? How could anyone do such a thing?" It is how we feel when we read of harm coming to an innocent child. It is "impossible possibility" in that it defies explanation. Attempts to provide a reason for such evil may be tempting, but it is probably best to live with the unexplainable to ensure we will never allow such evil to be considered as justified.

The same response of horror and anger felt at innocent suffering is how we are to hear Isaiah's vineyard song. God says, "How could they?" "How could anyone do such a thing?" "I gave you everything, good soil, rain in its season, protection and care, and you yielded wild grapes." It is an impossible possibility, and even if we don't feel it, God does, for it is God who is tasting the grapes we yield.

As we consider our own world, where the poor are still sequestered in ghettos, and children in unseen foreign lands sew our clothing, we cannot declare ignorance of how our privilege denies equal access to resources and opportunity. Our challenge is to consider that to be an impossible possibility in God's eyes, a wild grape yield, that is unacceptable to God's taste, and never to seek to allow it to be rationalized or accepted.

I was intrigued by the headline this week that read, "*The Millions of Americans Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton Barely Mention: The Poor.*" As I have said before, the so-called middle class seem to be accorded royal status in our elections, and the poor often ignored. For the past several election cycles, Christian groups such as Sojourners have sought to place the poor on the agenda, in the vineyard, not as a way to be politically correct, but as a call to political correction, faithful correction.

Jesus' message to the crowds was not anti-family, but a challenge to any status quo that stood in the way of expanding family to include the outcast, the alien, and the rejected. Some will contend that is the way it was, is now, and always will be. As followers of Christ, we are to be fully conscious of such inequity, consider it an impossible possibility, and commit ourselves to never allowing "as is" to be accepted. For if we do, we might as well feed God wild, rotten grapes.