

When all else fails, place your trust in God.

Isaiah 5: 1-7; Hebrews 11:29 – 12:2

How can we not identify with the struggles expressed in Isaiah, when we too are faced with disappointment after disappointment, repeatedly. When we feel like everyone and the world is against us. Working to make our lives harder. When the only conclusion left is often it's time to just throw in the towel. But when all else fails in this very moment when we are saying that to our selves; that is precisely the moment when we must have faith, when we place our trust in God. We need to hold on to the belief that nothing can separate us from the love of God.

The story of Isaiah, of the love song of this farmer and a vineyard is one that we can identify with. It really is a parable or an allegory of God and the people. The song starts as a love story about dedication and commitment. The gardener cared for and nurtured and protected that vineyard and believed that everything that he had done was perfect and just right. The field was nurtured and ready to grow. There was the sun, the water, the seeds that were planted were very good. The gardener even set up a watchtower to ensure that no animals tampered with the field and with the vines that were about to grow. The gardener had so much hope for what it would produce; this abundant vineyard with perfect grapes that were going to nurture and make us all happy. But the song turned to a minor key as God began to sing; the gardener expected it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes (sour grapes). The audience is then asked at the end to judge what happened. The question is whose fault is it that this field didn't yield its potential. What did the farmer forget to do? God sings at the end, 'What more could be done?' and there was no answer. The unspoken answer is; nothing. Nothing more could be done.

We as God's chosen people are the field. The vineyard rich in promise. We have been planted in the most fertile ground and protected and nurtured and provided with everything we could possibly need in order to produce the most perfect grape. But this doesn't happen. The vineyard, or as the allegory claims we the people, do not live up to our potential. The expected yield does not come to fruition and God is disappointed. God has high expectations for the covenanted people. God experiences great remorse, anger and anguish. The allegory is a reminder to us what relationships are about. In any relationship we need to invest ourselves in order for the fruits of our labour to be realized, but ultimately in the end we can do everything in our power to make it work, to nurture that relationship and deepen that relationship and it can still fail. It doesn't always bring us what we thought it would; and it doesn't always matter what we do. The reality is that God expected justice and instead found bloodshed; God expected righteousness and

instead heard a cry. What is hard for us to hear is what happens next. God then chooses to destroy the wall around the garden and then lay waste to the entire land. The vineyard would be allowed to die. So, the question today is this: Are we ready to face our brokenness; to face reality in the truth?

The Hebrews passage continues from last week where the writer was introducing the idea of faith as the courage to endure; endure whatever it is that God puts before us. The writer was trying to provide the small group of Christians with hope and courage as they faced hostility, ridicule and shame because of their beliefs because in that time being Christian was not safe.¹ The writer of Hebrews tells stories of those who came before, who acted by faith, who through faith were able to conquer kingdoms and administer justice, shut the mouths of lions and quench the raging fire, won strength out of weakness. They did this even though they did not receive what they were promised.

The writer then goes on to remind us that there was this great crowd of witnesses who have come before us, who encircle us this day and bring us strength to answer God's call by faith. What we need to do is persevere in this race and for some reason every year we always get the race scripture on the marathon day, it is a convenient little thing for us. So, you can imagine that you are a runner in a marathon and this great crowd of witnesses is around you like the past Olympians who have won marathons standing there cheering you on. Will you give up in that moment or will you, like I did, find strength that you never thought you had to run further and faster than you ever thought you could. Or will you throw in the towel in defeat; will you look around and hope that somebody picks up that towel you threw down and start swinging it around in a rally cry as good Edmontonians do at hockey games. Will we give up as the gardener did when the crop yields sour grapes?

A theologian by the name of John Shelley has come to believe the following:

‘Often our moral failures are more a failure of imagination than a deficit of good intention and good will. We resort to violence because we have been unable to conceive a better way of dealing with conflict.’²

So, let me ask you this: Have we become too set in our ways; too comfortable with our perception of how the world should work? What is it that we are being called to do? What do we expect to happen and what do you think is required of us? Are we closed off from being nurtured in our faith or closed off from having faith in our beliefs challenged?

This fall we will be inviting you to join a book study and the book is entitled, ‘The Person You Mean to Be; How Good People Fight Bias’. This book begins by redefining what it means to be a good person. It says, ‘A good person is trying to be better, as opposed to someone who is

¹ John C. Shelley, *Feasting on the Word*, Year C Volume 3 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), p. 352.

² _____, p. 354.

allowing themselves to believe in the illusion that they are always a good person.’³ The book also states that in order to make change in this world we need to build a growth mindset. I believe that is what the scripture is calling us to do today is to grow a growth mindset. God has provided us with everything we need to be people of love and compassion in this world and yet somehow, we live in a world that is wrought with violence still; with inequality; bloodshed. “Mindset refers to our belief about our capacity to learn and improve. If I have a growth mindset about drawing, I believe that I can improve my stick figures with effort, time and feedback. The alternative, a fixed mindset, is where I see myself as fully formed; either someone who is terrible at drawing or wonderful at it, or somewhere in between, but destined to stay that way. The fixed mindset is an either/or mindset because it allows no room for being a work in progress.”⁴ The God of the Old Testament would fall in the category of a fixed mindset. The vineyard failed and therefore there is nothing to do. The God of the New Testament though has changed to a growth mindset. There is hope.

Jesus calls us to be disciples to learn and grow in faith. God does not expect us to be fully formed as disciples and to completely understand everything; to know how to act perfectly. When we are open to practicing love in a way that is not always comfortable, we are in a growth mindset. Learning to love people that have hurt us; learning to love stranger and enemy requires a growth mindset. We can’t just take the exact same path as those people who came before us for things have changed. The world has changed. How we understand who we are in this world has changed and so we need to be open to adapting our faith as well.

“Faith allows people to see beyond what is right in front of them. To see beyond our daily problems and to see what God is doing in their midst. To see what God has done through the ages and to see the future of God and the joy that God has in store for us.”⁵ Faith requires growth mindset; one where trial and error are welcomed and happen. I want you to take time this week to reflect on where you have a fixed mindset in your life. Where is it that you are closed off in your faith, in your family, in your work, in your daily life. And because of that fixed mindset what possibly are you missing? Think of that potential field of grapes that could have provided us with so much good wine. What happens when we are not open to that and we turn into sour grapes? None of us get to enjoy what is being given to us. Remember that there is a huge crowd of witnesses that are there rallying, cheering you on into a growth mindset, not a fixed one. Being perfect in the eyes of God is not what is required for as I said before, nothing can separate us from the love of God and for this we give God thanks. Amen.

³ Dolly Chugh, *The Person you mean to be; how good people fight bias*, Kindle Edition p. 20.

⁴ _____, p. 23.

⁵ David E. Gray, *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Volume 3 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), p. 354.