

Sermon for Sunday, October 4, 2020 - "Hope and Humility"

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Decorah, Iowa
Rev. Amy Zalk Larson

[Click here to read scripture passages for the day.](#)

Beloved of God grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus.

This week, my husband Matt and I got to have a physically distanced gathering with some friends from Oregon who have a family home in Decorah. Since they were coming to our porch, I brought out some wine to serve them; but it was nowhere near as good as the amazing wine from Oregon they brought over. The gift of good friends, good wine and good conversation was so nurturing to me this week.

That time and our readings today also got me thinking about what brings about good grapes and good wine both literally and metaphorically. Both our first reading and our Gospel reading today consider that question and bring us into vineyards. In Isaiah we hear God's people described as a vineyard. God plants and tends and nurtures and provides for the vineyard. God expects it to bear good fruit, the good grapes of justice and righteousness. Yet, instead of an abundant and pleasant harvest, God sees the wild grapes of violence, arrogance and bloodshed. Jesus tells a parable about tenants in God's vineyard. They begin to think that they are entitled to all that the vineyard produces, that they can do whatever they want with it. They become greedy, arrogant, violent.

These readings hit awfully close to home these days. We long for justice but see bloodshed. We hope for righteousness but hear a cry. What will bring change? What will bring about good fruit? What should be done?

Jesus asks his listeners what should be done about God's vineyard that has been overrun by murderous tenants. They respond with outrage about the actions of the tenants. They assume the owner feels outrage as well - that he will "put those wretches to a miserable death." It isn't until later that they realize Jesus is speaking about them. They are quick to get self-righteously angry, quick to cast blame and point fingers. But like that old adage goes, if you point a finger at someone there are three pointing back at you.

As we consider the problems in our country these days, we are so quick to get self-righteous, to judge, to condemn, to lay the fault on others. Yet, that doesn't lead to a healthy vineyard. Laying blame doesn't change anything. Getting outraged at how others are responding only makes things worse. Cutting ourselves off from those who disagree does not produce growth. These are all variations of self-righteousness, and as Paul wrote in Philippians, self-righteousness is garbage of the worst kind; it's a fertilizer that produces wild grapes.

The fertilizer we need to bear good fruit is humility. The word humility comes from the Latin word humus, which means earth.

I was reminded of the importance of humility this week as I read a reflection by Pr. Nathan Wicks,

one of the people Good Shepherd has supported along the path to pastoral ministry. Pr. Wicks writes, "Humility describes a way of relating to one another not out of self-righteousness or anger or trying to dominate another side by constantly telling them how wrong they are. Humility actually works against that self-righteous desire for the sake of maintaining an honest relationship with another. Humility can approach real differences and conflicts while still honoring the dignity of those with whom you disagree. Relationships of *humility* keep us *human*, both words coming from that word *humus*, as we honor the common ground from which we were molded by God and breathed to life..."

Pr. Wicks then points us to the cross, the ultimate gift of humility. He writes, "On the cross we don't get the savior we want. We don't have a Savior who simply lifts us out of the conflicts of our lives, finally giving the satisfaction of definitively proving why those we disagree with are so wrong. In Jesus, we have a Savior who submits to our self-righteous rage and is torn apart by it, a Savior who [as we heard last week in Philippians 2] "does not regard equality with God as something to be exploited but emptied himself ... he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death -- even death on a cross." And in this way of humility is the ultimate surprise, "Therefore, God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name ..." (pastoral letter by Pr. Nathan Wicks).

In the cross is our greatest hope, the humble hope of resurrection.

Beloved of God, the cross and resurrection of Jesus is the hope of the world. It is what brings change and new life. It is what makes our humility possible. I think so often we end up in the way of outrage and self-righteousness because we start to think it is all up to us to make things better. That is such a heavy burden and it leads us to fear and judge and blame others who do things differently. Yet, in Christ's cross and resurrection we see that even humanity's most evil, violent actions cannot stop God from loving, forgiving and working new life. We see that it is not up to us to fix the vineyard. It is not up to us to produce good fruit.

Rather we are called into relationship with Christ Jesus who chose the way of humility. In that relationship, we are brought down to earth from our high horse as we are convicted of our sin. We are also set free as we are forgiven and assured that nothing we do can prevent God from working life for us and through us. In this relationship with Christ, we find that we are not alone, that Christ shares the common ground of our humanity and knows what we're going through. We are brought into relationship with the humble, grounding gifts of community, words, song, prayer, bread and wine. These gifts shape and form us so that we will be able to enter humbly the holy ground of relationship with others, even those who differ from us. We are shaped to share in Christ's ministry of reconciliation and new life knowing it does not all depend upon us.

What will bring good fruit, what will bring change in the vineyard? Christ Jesus is bringing that change now in you and through you. Your sin, the sin of the world cannot prevent God from bringing new life. You can meet others on the holy ground of a humble relationship knowing that Christ meets you there first.

Let's take a moment for silent prayer.

