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The Rev. Laurie L. Newman

Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost

St. Andrew Lutheran, Beaverton

What an interesting “love song” we heard this morning--from the prophet Isaiah. We’ve heard similar love songs. In my college days, I had a good friend (a Lutheran from Minnesota! )-who encouraged me to really dig into the feeling bad--when disappointed in love. I listened to Linda Rondstadt croon “You’re no good, you’re no good, you’re no good, baby, you’re no good.”

Some of us have been there, in some way, at some point: you invested your love and care into another, with hope and expectation of a fruitful, delicious harvest. . . a vintage of wine that would sweeten with age. But, what you got instead was bitter disappointment. The prophet speaks for God. He says: “I expected a sweet harvest, but baby, you’re no good.”

When you dig into the Hebrew, it’s not really clear which plant was the “wild grape.” But what is clear is that the well -tended vineyard produces fruit that is not what the landowner expected. What happens next, is really natural consequences: the owner removes the protecting wall and allows the vineyard to be trampled, and devoured.

The message from Isaiah came from a time of exile, when God’s people were yearning for an explanation—how did things go so wrong with us? How did we get here?

The parable that Jesus tells, in Matthew’s Gospel, shows that the hearers were familiar with the warning from Isaiah. It’s important to note, that this passage is one that has been tragically used to blame and persecute Jewish people. Because of the long Christian tradition that “the Jews” rejected Jesus, Christians have often surmised that the wicked and greedy tenants in the parable are the Jewish people as a whole. The tenants are not “the Jews.” The vineyard is the people and the land. The final verses of our reading make clear: the chief priests and Pharisees

realized that Jesus was speaking about them! They were in the power position. They were supposed to be leading and caring for the people, prioritizing the most vulnerable. But, instead they were greedily abusing their privilege at the expense of others.

In Isaiah's time, in Jesus' time, and in our time. . . the powerful preying upon the vulnerable—continues. The human harvest is wild grapes, not the grape of justice and delight, as God intends. The war between Hamas and Israel that may seem shocking, is the violent fruit from long standing conflict and injustice.

When we look at the harvest of our culture, we see other rotten fruit: the tolerance of casual, daily violence; abusive language about others who seem different; the rejection of migrants and refugees; slurs upon race and gender. We are watching our justice system address violence and abuses of power, while those at the top still use their influence to threaten and manipulate. Over scores of years, powerful interests have kept our nation's leaders from making crucially needed steps to address climate change, which hits the most vulnerable first, and the hardest. Our children are unprotected from guns in their schools, despite the majority of Americans who favor common sense controls, because of an imbalance of money and power. Bitter, wild grapes, indeed.

You may be asking: what the heck is the good news in this sermon? Well, my friends, the good news is that the vineyard belongs to God, not to the greedy tenants. We belong to God. All people belong to God. All creation belongs to God. And God so loves us that God's faithful love will never let us go. Even we turn away, and fail to use the power we have in the most loving ways, Jesus points the way back to God: to love God, self, and love the neighbor as the self.

Like Isaiah and other prophets, Jesus points out the disquieting truth. This sermon really has two levels. One level is about Jesus' anger over those getting rich on the suffering of the poor and innocent, of making their own rules, and destroying the vineyard. I could call out by name those who are in the public eye these days, who are clear examples of corrupt power, and abusers of privilege. But, that's easy—pointing the finger at others. What's harder is the other level. It's about our power, yours and mine. We all have power. No matter our situation or status, we have the power to love, and to care for others, in our daily choices. Bearing the fruit of the Spirit in our lives goes way beyond showing up on Sunday mornings. It goes to how we live our lives daily.

For example, we should ask ourselves: Are my words about another person, a colleague, an acquaintance, a family member: is it building them up, or is it degrading them? Am I helping, or am I gossiping? Are my financial decisions based only upon gaining the highest yield for me, dollar wise, or am I conscious of how it impacts others? Am I reinforcing in myself feelings of anger and resentment? Or am I practicing forbearance, and seeking out God in others? How is my heart with God, today? The words of the song are true: "Let there be peace on earth, and let it begin with me."

Friends, we can take note of the good news from our reading from Philippians today: "For Christ's sake, we can relinquish what we cling to: our resentments, our fears, and all that keeps us from loving others. God's grace enables us to make choices for love. To see ourselves with clarity. To give in the way that Jesus gave all for love. This isn't pie-in-the-sky. It's about what we choose, every day. The fruits of the kingdom can be seen in us, whenever we choose loving ourselves, and loving beyond ourselves.

For many of us, the most power we ever wield is in our family situations.

Over the years of ministry, I've been inspired by many couples who've managed to make choices that were centered in love for their mate, even as life presents greater and greater challenges. One of those couples is a retired pastor I know. She was diagnosed (at a fairly young age) with ALS over a decade ago. Her wife is also young, healthy and active. As ALS has impacted their lives more and more, the evidence of the fruit of the Spirit is also seen: patience, kindness, honesty, trust, and faithfulness.

But we also have power to choose non-violence beyond our families.

Pastor Otis Moss III, leader of the Poor People's Campaign, tells about an experience he had growing up. As a youngster he got into a disagreement with his best friend, Nick. Nick had taken his ball. In anger, Otis jumped him and fought him until he got his ball back. He brought the ball home, feeling proud, but when his mother found out, she was unimpressed. She said, "Never allow someone to have that much power over your spirit." She explained that once someone learns how to get under your skin, now to provoke you into unleashing violence, then you have given away the real power, the power of choice. You may feel strong at the moment you lash out, but the truth is, you were coerced.

Friends, the good news is that we get to choose, every day. And the love of Christ, the power of the Spirit is with us always to encourage our loving and good choices, to allow for the growth of a beautiful, flourish vineyard of love and justice.