

Isaiah 5:1-7 19 Pentecost 10.1.26 Bill Uetracht

Being thrown into the morass, quagmire, jungle of difficult texts, I couldn't help this past week but think of the complicated relationship of disappointment, anger, and love. A lot of times we think that love, disappointment, and anger don't belong together. For some love and anger are opposites. But that doesn't seem to be the case with the God of the Bible.

In our first reading for today, Isaiah gives us a love song. Now I must admit that Isaiah's love song doesn't sound like one that Etta James, Adele, Beyonce, or Frank Sinatra would sing. This is a phenomenally dark love song. Instead of something like Dolly Parton's or Whitney Huston's "I Will Always Love You," this sounds like something from the band, the Police: "Every move you make. And every vow you break. Every smile you fake. Every claim you stake. I'll be watching you."

Maybe that's a bit of an overstatement, but like The Police's love song, Isaiah's love song is certainly dark. I have to wonder if it is not satire. "I will sing for my beloved my love song concerning his vineyard. My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. He went all out to make it the best vineyard ever. He cleared it of stones and planted it with choice vines. He made sure that it was protected. He built a watchtower in the midst of it. He had grand expectations for it. He put a huge wine vat in it. What more could he have done for it? Nothing.

But you know what the vineyard gave him, according to the love song. Sheer disappointment. He expected it to yield sweet smelling grapes. But you know what it gave him? Stinking grapes. Spoiled grapes. Grapes not good for wine or much of anything.

By the way, in case you haven't figured it out, this vineyard is the people of Israel and Judah, the North and the South. Their behavior is really disappointing. The Beloved, God, expected justice from them, care for the folks on the fringe, and what they gave him was bloodshed, violent practices that bled the left out and the poor. What he expected was righteousness, but what he heard were cries of anguish from the oppressed.

God is deeply disappointed with his own loved people. And in fact, he is ticked off. He is angry. Listen to him: "And now I will tell you what I will do with my vineyard, my cherished garden. I will remove its hedge, and it shall be devoured. I will break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down. I will make it a wasteland. I will command the clouds not to rain upon it."

I am sure you can't relate to this little temper tantrum of God. I am sure you have never gotten so mad that you have said some really awful things, things that maybe you meant but maybe you didn't really. Love takes you sometimes to unexpected places.

I don't know if God regretted saying this stuff. Who knows for sure? In the Noah story in the book of Genesis, he seems to regret the tantrum that was the flood he brought about. After everything was said and done, he said to *all things* that *never again* would he get so angry that he would destroy everything. The bow in the sky (maybe the rainbow) would be a reminder of his promise that he was going to keep his anger in check. The rainbow would be like the string that you place around your finger so that you don't forget to do something. Oh yah! There's that rainbow. I need to keep my anger in check. Love has this way of engaging anger but also limiting it, too.

Our Psalm for today also takes us into the realm of disappointment and anger. Something bad has obviously happened to the whole community. I don't know. Maybe a drought. Maybe a famine. Maybe a lost battle. The whole community is facing problems. They view these problems as a result of God's anger. The Psalmist asks: "O Lord God of hosts, how long will you be angry with your people's prayers? Come on! We've had enough. You have fed us with the bread of tears. Restore us; let your face shine, that we may be saved."

"You love us. We know that. You brought us, a cherished vine, out of Egypt. You gave us great land. You cleared the ground for us. And now what's up? Why have you broken down our walls of protection? You have allowed the nasty old, unclean boar into our land. God, you can do better. We are disappointed. And I don't know. Maybe we are a bit angry. Turn again. Change your mind. Repent! Look down from heaven and see us. Have regard for us, your beloved vine."

In the first reading, God is disappointed and ticked off. In the Psalm, it's the people who are disappointed, disappointed in God, and maybe even ticked off with him. Love asks some bold things.

You see, disappointment and anger do not represent the absence of love. Apathy, it seems to me, is the opposite of love. Disappointment and anger are signs that love is still operative. You don't get disappointed in a relationship that doesn't matter to you. Often you don't get angry with people who are of no concern to you. Sometimes the people you get the angriest with are the people you love the most. Love often brings us into the muddy waters of disappointment and anger.

I appreciate the Bible's willingness to take us to those muddy waters. And truthfully, I appreciate being a part of tradition that is willing to enter the struggle, one that doesn't need to cover up disappointment and anger, one that can sing songs of lament, as well as songs of praise. I said on Facebook the other day that I want a religion that is real. And real life entails not only successes and joys; it includes sadness, suffering, disappointment, and anger.

I'd be lying if I told you that I don't get disappointed quite often. People disappoint me, as I am sure I disappoint them. But more than that, let's be honest. Life itself can be disappointing. And for some, that causes some to wonder about the disappointing character of God. The struggle with God is real.

We've had some very difficult things happening in our faith community over this past week, things that, truthfully, made me very disappointed and even a bit angry. Too often, life just doesn't make sense. I am overwhelmed sometimes by what people have to endure in life, good, faithful, beloved people. My heart aches because of the disappointing character of life.

And the Bible doesn't run from that. As in life, in the Bible it is not all sweetness and niceness. Nancy Koester in speaking of our Psalm for today says that in this song we "meet a God unconstrained by the bonds of niceness, a God who has to play the ball where it is, which is often among the brambles and thorns." If you are going to take the Bible seriously, don't expect a God of niceness, a world of ease.

In today's gospel reading, we encounter Jesus among a not-nice world, among the brambles and thorns. I'll be honest. I don't always appreciate Matthew's parables. They can be brutal and

violent. And this one is no exception. This story probably wasn't told by Jesus but was brought to us by Matthew as he was trying to help his community figure out some things.

The parable speaks of the son who was rejected. Clearly, this son is Jesus. And the people who reject him are the religious leaders of his time. Jesus is the stone that the builders rejected. He was the one who was killed because of their anger. The religious leaders, contrary to what you would expect, are the disappointing and angry ones.

Do you get it? At the heart of our story is one who was the victim of anger and the disappointing character of life and people. After the sermon, we will sing a verse of a song by Noel Paul Stookey of Peter, Paul, and Mary, that goes like this: "There is a man who has collected all the sorrow in our eyes. He gives us love as God directed but is seldom recognized." At the center of the Christian message is one who can easily be missed, especially in a culture in which strength, power, and conquering are at the center of our stories. This one at the cross collects all of life's not rightness, all of its disappointments and its anger, all of its sadness. This one who is love itself, was rejected, but he, Jesus, has become the cornerstone of a whole new world.

And if the rejected one is the cornerstone, then you and I don't have to run from life as it really is. Sure, we want to rejoice with life as often as we can; we want to laugh with it. But we also can cry with it. We can tell the truth about it. We don't have to pretend that in life there aren't reasons to be disappointed or angry. It indeed is a love song that God is singing to us, and it is amazing where love will take us.