

Twenty-seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle A

Isaiah 5:1-7; Philippians 4:6-9; and Matthew 21:33-43

Have you ever entered into a relationship with someone else – a lover, a friend, a partner – entered in whole-heartedly, only to discover, well into the relationship, that the other person was not as interested or committed as you were? Such sorrow! We search our hearts and the timeline of the relationship for signs we missed or things we could have done/said differently. We also grab our playlist and find the appropriate sad songs to help us get through.

That is just where God is at in Isaiah 5. Isaiah says, "Let me now sing of my friend, my friend's song concerning his vineyard." Isaiah spells out the effort his friend put into creating a vineyard for these special plants. The care ends abruptly with the "response" of the grapes: they are *wild*, a word that can also be translated as *stinking* or *worthless*. This is, of course, a song the prophet sings for God, whose heart has been broken by the Israelites. As in any ballad of the broken-hearted, God asks the Beloved to acknowledge their wrongdoing and declares why "you're gonna miss me when I'm gone."

However, when love involves God, it is always about more than God and the individual. Like children of divorce or workers in a failing company, the weakest members of society suffer when our contribution to our relationship with God stinks. So Isaiah's song ends with notes of societal pain: the Lord of hosts "looked for righteousness, but see, bloodshed! For justice, but hark, the outcry!" Walter Brueggemann notes that *bloodshed* is not a physical attack but "the more subtle, slower but equally decisive killing through economic policy against the vulnerable and resourceless."¹ The *outcry* is their cry of despair. God sings this same song today just as sorrowfully as 2,500 years ago. The six "ah, alas!" comments that continue the song beyond vs. 7 describe behaviors all too familiar today: those who amass homes and wealth leaving nothing for others, those who spend so much time on leisure they have no time left to learn about God, those who demand God do what they want when they want it, those who confuse truth and lies, those who think they are wise and those who acquit the guilty and condemn the innocent. Ah, alas! The consistency of human sin over the millennia! No wonder God is singing the blues!

What might motivate us, the breakers of God's heart, to change? Perhaps our own experiences of rejection will allow us to empathize with God. Maybe our brokenness can launch our conversion. Maybe we do not want to break God's heart like someone else broke ours.

In the gospel, Jesus tries to motivate us to change, but we may be tempted to dismiss his multi-chapter showdown with the Jewish leaders as aimed at someone else. In fact, this parable has often been read as God's rejection of Judaism for Christianity. However, just as we apply other gospel stories to ourselves, we ought to do so with this. When the chief priests and elders are asked to judge the parable's tenants, a.k.a. themselves, we are invited to do so as well. Do we kill God's messengers i.e. people whose weakness calls out for mercy? Do we reject the Son of God with our complacency and self-protection?

I have often wondered why the tenants did not simply pay their rent and why they killed the owner's servants and son. These acts seem stupid and outrageous. Unsurprisingly, the one who breaks another's heart is often the only one who cannot see the evil of his/her actions. Is there a signal for the danger we create for ourselves? Perhaps the anxiety of Phil 4:6 can serve this purpose. When it rises, Paul advises gratefully giving God all our concerns and "keep on doing what you have learned and... seen in me," i.e. living the Gospel. Then and only then will the God of peace and the peace of God be with us. By doing the works of the Kingdom of God, we will find fulfillment and then, both God and we will be singing a different tune – together.

- ❖ Reflect on the care God has taken in making for you a safe, fertile vineyard. How do you want to respond to this love?
- ❖ Are there people in society you look down on? What could you do for them that God would consider worthwhile?

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¹ Quoted in *The Paulist Biblical Commentary*, 2018, Paulist Press. p. 611.