

Isaiah 5:1-7 NRSV The Song of the Unfruitful Vineyard

<sup>1</sup> Let me sing for my beloved  
my love-song concerning his vineyard:

My beloved had a vineyard  
on a very fertile hill.

<sup>2</sup> He dug it and cleared it of stones,  
and planted it with choice vines;  
he built a watch-tower in the midst of it,  
and hewed out a wine vat in it;  
he expected it to yield grapes,  
but it yielded wild grapes.

<sup>3</sup> And now, inhabitants of Jerusalem  
and people of Judah,  
judge between me  
and my vineyard.

<sup>4</sup> What more was there to do for my vineyard  
that I have not done in it?  
When I expected it to yield grapes,  
why did it yield wild grapes?

<sup>5</sup> And now I will tell you  
what I will do to my vineyard.  
I will remove its hedge,  
and it shall be devoured;  
I will break down its wall,  
and it shall be trampled down.

<sup>6</sup> I will make it a waste;  
it shall not be pruned or hoed,  
and it shall be overgrown with briars and thorns;  
I will also command the clouds  
that they rain no rain upon it.

<sup>7</sup> For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts  
is the house of Israel,  
and the people of Judah  
are his pleasant planting;  
he expected justice,  
but saw bloodshed;  
righteousness,  
but heard a cry!

Today's scripture comes from the book of Isaiah 5. This particular section is written as a love song that quickly turns sour. This song starts out being sung by the prophet and quickly

becomes a bitter duet. In music, we call this *dissonance* when the music sung just does not quite sound right. During our own choir practice, whenever I see the musical term dissonance on the sheet music, I fully expect that section of the music to be practiced the most because it is difficult to hear and difficult to have it leave our mouths. This love song in Isaiah is the same, very difficult. The song of God's vineyard, found in verses 1-7 is a complex parable with strong figures of grapes and their production tied to the community and their work of justice and righteousness (Carroll, 119-120). The song is about a vineyard, of the love and tending God does for people. The betrayal God receives from the beloved is so painful that God cannot sing it and must be sung by Isaiah on behalf of God (Willis, 347).

This song ends, as an indictment for the crimes Judah is being accused of, in a cry of what has happened to the land God so tenderly and meticulously created. The walls, terraces, soil, and choicest vines are all left to be trampled (Matthews, 28) The ancient writers who used the Hebrew language had an interesting way of communicating these words. Since most people did not read, these messages were recited orally, so those who told the stories would use puns or other word plays for the audience. For instead of Mishpat, the Hebrew for "justice", as God hoped for, God saw Mispach, the Hebrew for "bloodshed". And instead of Tsedaqah, the Hebrew for "righteousness", God saw Tse'aqah, the "cries of distress" (McCann, 1). This was very common for the prophets to show how the people have missed the mark completely by just a slight change of the words.

During this time in Judah, history shows this as a long period of peace during the reign of King Uzziah in the 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE. There was great wealth and prosperity but this was only true for the ruling class and the merchants. Also during this time, there was a movement from the owning of inherited land, passed down from generation to generation, to outsiders who took

over their country and using their power to take the land of the families.—(Global Bible Commentary, 188). There was a highly sophisticated system, set up by the wealthy, with the support of the court system, of accumulating all the land around family homes and farms, and closing in on them and taking the homes (Pemnath, 1). Not only was the land taken that kept the families fed, the families had to pay the powerful for overpriced food. It created a loan system that the poor just could never repay. The courts worked against these people and sided with the land-grabbers. The only way people could pay off the loans was by selling the only collateral they had; their homes and farms. This system was not just taking over a family's land; it also included growing urban centers and requiring people to work there, taking them from their homes. During this time, the government began military campaigns, additionally taking working men from their families and placing them in the service of the king. Also with the expansion of trade and commerce, the poor were further exploited and unfair market conditions hit the small farms the hardest. These governmental actions furthered the debt of the poor; and along with the exploitative creditors, oppressive debt collectors and an unjust judicial system, the number of poor and displaced people outrageously grew in number (Pemnath, 20-24). And what was even more disgusting, the elite were very public in their flaunting of wealth, dining on the food surpluses while families starved. The elite paraded their leisure and luxuries, showing off their material trinkets from expensive imports (Pemnath, 22). Everything started to stack up against the working poor of Judah. From losing their homes to foreclosure, to the constant debt collection calls, to overpriced groceries and cuts in the food stamp programs, to the courts declaring that these corporations exploiting them are now considered people too, Judah was poised to lose everything to support the King and the elite. Justice has been denied as God could only see the blood being shed of the poor. The cries of the hungry are now louder than the voice

of righteousness. For instead of Mishpat, or “justice”, God saw Mispach, or “bloodshed”. And instead of Tsedaqah, or “righteousness”, God saw Tse’aqah, the “cries of distress”

Now, you tell me, do we live in a day and age like Isaiah where those who have much power and money keep it from others? Do we live in a time that power and money dictate the laws that affect the people with no power or money?

After reading this scripture, I wondered if we were in a time like Isaiah. I wondered if God heard bloodshed or justice from me. Am I contributing to the system of justice or to the system of death? While I don’t have much money, I certainly am responsible to how I do use the portion that keeps Sophia and me afloat. I shop for the discounts, most months desperately maximizing my minimal funds. I, like all of you, must purchase gas for the vehicle, groceries to live, insurance for protection. At the end of every month, I always wonder where the money went. I realized that the majority goes to Walmart. I am happy to see that company offer fair-trade coffee and their initiative to reduce their energy usage by implementing “green” programs. But is that the whole story or the one they choose to tell? Recently, we have heard in the news about Walmart and the allegations of bribery with our southern neighbor in Mexico. It is reported that the New York Times held information about Walmart and the allegations of bribery. Walmart, being pressured by what the Times knew, came forward to the government, stating that this supposed bribery happened six years ago as the law has a five-year statute of limitations. Instead of being reprimanded for large-scale bribery, Walmart is spinning the allegations of the crime to say that they did their own investigation and found that it was already fixed by putting in new policies, just beyond the timeframe from being prosecutable. Instead of going after the unethical actions of Walmart, the New York Times turned their attack on the laws that could charge the original bribery, claiming the law is going too far. There are 15 people in

the Justice Department that focus on business fraud. Fifteen. We have communicated through our laws and legislation that companies can get a free pass for unfair labor practices, as long as you stay out of the radar of just 15 people. The New York Times later reported that the law is unnecessary because companies are willing to settle out of court to resolve the issues and there is no need for judicial oversight (Savage, 4/26/2012). I don't know about you, but when I drive my car and speed a little, I'm not going to turn myself in and pay a ticket in which I didn't get caught.

Now I bring up the company of Walmart because it hits home for all of us, especially me. I come from a family who jokes about the time we spend at Walmart. The old joke with my mom is if she isn't at home, she is at Walmart. Often, we call each other and meet there to purchase what we need and socialize. When I tell Sophia that we are going shopping, I imagine that she sees in her mind's eye the aisles of Walmart. I am very guilty of going there several times a week. Walmart, for me and my family, defines how we are consumers. And Walmart defines how we spend our money. We all participate in the low-cost savings that Walmart supposedly passes on to each of us. But allow me to point out the system we are in the middle of with little or no other options. Walmart claims to be consumer-friendly, driving the workforce and, in many states, by being the largest employer. But the facts show how detrimental Walmart really is. For every two jobs created by Walmart, it destroys three local jobs ("Top Reasons the Walton Family and Walmart Are NOT "Job Creators"). Manufacturing has greatly diminished as a result of the cheap imports from places like China. Our local workers make an average of \$8.81 an hour; that is less than 70% of the poverty line for a family of four. Also, do you think anyone can afford a 120% healthcare premium increase on \$8 an hour? (The High Cost of Low Prices). And how does our government reward Walmart? By giving them \$1.2 billion in tax breaks, free

land, and additional subsidies. In St. Louis, they gave \$31 million. That's \$31 million taken away from schools, firefighters and police...all MAJOR struggles the city and surrounding areas of St. Louis just cannot seem to fix...and adds to the continued destruction by keeping it the most dangerous city in the United States. In Illinois, our government decided to give \$100 million in subsidies. Folks, we are a state ridiculed by others for our inability to pay our bills. We are the Greece of the United States.

And how are our neighborhoods rewarded by Walmart? Walmart abandons large buildings and litters our streets when they want to greedily occupy even larger buildings. 27 million square feet of empty space is sitting vacant in the United States (Walmart, 2011 Global Responsibility Report).

What are we teaching our children from our spending habits? Are we teaching them that purchasing cheap, disposable junk leads to happiness? And what kind of landscape are we leaving for our kids when just one Supercenter covers over a million square feet in concrete? This affects water quality, air quality, the draining of energy to maintain a store, and quicker filled landfills with broken and cheap goods. Are we really willing to turn a blind eye to all of this? Our government officials are, especially when \$3.9 million goes from the hands of Walmart straight to the congress men and women who have the lowest voting records in environmental issues (Learn All about Walmart). We are rewarding those who have the power to sustain our future for our children when they purposefully are destroying the vineyards.

One of my favorite conversations in seminary is "If Jesus was here in this time, who would he be?" Some people imagine that it might be the undocumented worker or a mother in a poor African village with HIV. When I think about that question, I think of how Ancient Palestine was a vassal state of Rome. The lands that Rome ruled fed money, wealth and goods into Rome

to create the Pax Roma, also known as the time Rome had peace because all the vassal states supported it through their oppression by the Romans. I imagine that if Jesus was here today, he might be a person in China, exploited by his employer for cheap labor, feeding the needs of consumers in other countries similar to how Rome lived off of the lands they controlled. Perhaps the United States and other countries that are controlled by their consumerism are the ones in power who are continuing in the social acceptance of oppression.

I hope, by using Walmart as an example, to show you what systems we participate in. Is Walmart the enemy? I don't think so. We participate in a culture that is okay with companies that want to expand profit and make their share-holders happy. Walmart is definitely not the only company to do this...most, if not all, are like this. I am using Walmart and the example only because it is the closest to home and we know a lot about them; but what other systems do we contribute to? How do we spend money? Where do our dollars go and who is getting rich from us, all the while, exploiting us to their greed? What are we sacrificing when we blindly give our resources to the greedy? What warnings have you heard from Isaiah? Where are we heading? But as we know, we believe in a hope. We believe in a salvation that frees us from the systems that surround us. Specifically, what are some tangible things we can do right now? As Christians, we have the tools. For myself, I applied the spiritual discipline of fasting and Lent. I recognized that Walmart has become an addiction for me when I was there several times a week, if not every day. I vowed to give myself a break for 40 days from going there to shop. I read stories of how people can live outside of the megastore. I found myself looking for local companies with higher labor ethics. It wasn't easy, but it was worth it. Kicking the habit of Walmart resulted in having money at the end of the month. I have gained great awareness to my habits of overconsumption. The cheap products that I found myself constantly repurchasing,

such as replacing alarm clocks or disposable razors, came to a halt. I realized that these disposable items, that Walmart is happy to manufacture cheaply to keep me in their cycle of purchasing, is how they view my money and how they view store employees and foreign manufacturing employees. We are disposable. We also have the Christian practice of daily bible devotional readings. During this time of fasting from my consumerism, I was led to learn more about the responsibility of stewardship for my own personal finances, stewardship of the earth, but more importantly, stewardship towards all of God's beloved children. Please understand me, it is not a calling for a boycott, rather it is a time-out to reflect upon our dependency on their system and to see what God is calling on our lives. Is God pleased when we support justice or when we participate in society's acceptable oppression?

I will leave you with one final thought. Dr. Rita Nakashima Brock, a world-renowned scholar and Disciples of Christ minister participates in between speaking engagements in her home town of Oakland with the Occupy Movement. She often updates her thoughts and events on her blog as she volunteers in the Interfaith tent. She brings a peaceful presence to her neighborhood. Her words challenge us to seek out injustice and expose the oppressors. Dr. Nakashima Brock states, "Occupations are also prophetic speech acts; they stand in a long and distinguished biblical tradition that uses such acts to hold the powerful accountable for the suffering of the people. Because prophetic acts expose attempts of the criminals in power to deny, ignore or crush the hard truths of injustice, they require courage to handle the inevitable backlash of the powerful. Standing in that long legacy, occupations expose homelessness, foreclosures, rising poverty, gross injustice and the continuing financial crisis." Dr. Nakashima Brock really made me think about how systems are used for and against people. She reminded me of the call on Jesus' life. Jesus was a radical and challenged the status quo. Jesus exposed

social norms through his actions and words. He challenged purity laws by stating in Mark 7:15, “It’s not what goes into a person from the outside that can defile; rather it’s what comes out of the person that defiles.” The purity laws, at that time, kept those who were considered clean above and more worthy of God than those considered unclean. Jesus challenged the system by saying that all are worthy of God’s love and purity is found inside, and that was a powerful and political statement against the socially accepted system. Jesus also healed the unclean by touching them. Jesus also spoke with women who were considered unclean, a BIG no-no, even defending the discipleship of Mary to Martha, and the woman who cleaned the feet of Jesus, and the woman condemned to be stoned for adultery. Jesus also ate with the sinners, or unclean. Eating in those days was very intentional. It mattered what you ate, for purity and political purposes. All of this was to show an alternative to us. Jesus lived a counter-cultural life that called out the injustices of the social system and emphasized compassion. Compassion calls all of us to see that we are all equal and beloved children of God. We are called as Christians to follow Jesus. This is a time of dissonance. It is painful to hear the stories of how my socially acceptable, and even encouraged, habits are hurting others. It hurts me to realize that I am not honoring my neighbor in Collinsville by expecting them to work below the poverty level or how I am expecting my goods as cheaply as possible, bringing my neighbors in Asia great humiliation on their lives. This song is not easy to hear and even worse to sing. We can work towards peace and equality. That is what Christ demands of us when we lay down our crosses and take up his. We do this for equality for all of God’s people. We are to show compassion period. What systems are keeping us from doing this? What system are you willing to stop participating in to follow the Christ who calls us love God and our neighbor with everything that we are?

Amen

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