

## “Trouble in Wine Country”

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9-15-19

Based upon Isaiah 5:1-10; Mark 12:1-12

In the award-winning movie Erin Brockovich, Julia Roberts stars as a legal assistant who inspires a small law firm to bring a class action lawsuit against Pacific Gas and Electric, for polluting the drinking water of the residents of Hinkley, California, with a carcinogen called chromium-6. When the corporation first hears the allegations against it, it is very dismissive of Brockovich, offering a settlement amount that is more of an insult than an offer of true reparations. But when Brockovich discovers more convicting evidence and hundreds more victims, the corporation’s lawyers are forced to take the case seriously. In one of the great, “gotcha” moments in this David-vs.-Goliath movie, Brockovich invites the lawyers for PG&E into her office’s conference room. “Are you thirsty?” she asks. Then when the lawyer goes to pick up a glass of water, she adds: “We had that water brought in ‘specially for you folks. Came from a well in Hinkley.”<sup>1</sup> When the lawyers then refuse to drink it, you know that Brockovich’s side is going to win.

I imagine that today’s prophecy by Isaiah must have felt like that gotcha movie moment in many respects. All of the people of Judah had gathered together for the harvest festival, when the wine produced by the grape harvest was finally tested and shared. People were probably gathered for a meal, passing the wine skins around, feeling joyful, proud, and more than a little bit tipsy. Then Isaiah got up in the middle of the toasting and congratulating and said, “Let me sing you a song.” “Great! Entertainment!” they must have thought, raising their glasses as he launched into a love song about an amazing vineyard with the most dedicated owner in the world. But just when they were expecting it to conclude in some way that made them feel even more successful, the love song Isaiah was singing suddenly became a “somebody-done-somebody-wrong song.” The beautiful, well-tended vineyard did not produce a bumper crop of lush grapes, it produced only wild grapes. Supremely frustrated that all his hard work had been for naught, the vineyard owner decided he was going to stop cultivating the vines, take the hedges and walls down that protected it, and even stop the rain. “Wait, stop the rain?” they were thinking. “Only God can do that.” That’s when it hit them that Isaiah wasn’t singing a sad old folk song; he was actually serving them legal notice. God was the vineyard owner and they, the people of Israel and Judah were the rogue, disappointing vine. They, who were supposed to produce God’s greatest vintage were in breach of their covenant promises to God; and God wasn’t going to tolerate that any longer. If they insisted on going wild, then God was no longer going to protect them from the consequences of their bad choices. Suddenly the full glasses of wine in front of them look a whole lot less inviting.

The image of God’s chosen people as “Yahweh’s vineyard” is an old one which recurs in several places in the Bible, so you’ve probably heard me preach on it before. The original conceit goes all the way back to the Exodus story. In Chapter 11 of *Deuteronomy*, when God was preparing the newly-minted people of Israel for life in the Promised Land, God drew a

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<sup>1</sup> *Erin Brockovich*, movie, directed by Stephen Soderbergh, (starring Julia Roberts and Albert Finney), (Universal Studios, Inc., 2000.)

distinction between what their life had been like under Pharaoh, and would it would be like under Yahweh's leadership. In Egypt, the people had worked as slaves to produce a harvest for their oppressor, one they rarely got to sample themselves. They didn't have what they needed for their work to be fruitful, but were expected to be productive anyway. In the Promised Land, everything would be different. God would provide them with everything they needed. They would live in a land of milk and honey, of abundant fruitfulness, a land which, as Moses' spies had discovered, could produce a grape harvest so huge that it took multiple people to carry the grapes. Surrounded by God's abundance, the people of Israel would no longer have to work to survive; they would work in gratitude for their blessings. As tenants of God's vineyard, they would, through their obedience to the Ten Commandments, produce such a harvest of love and justice and righteousness, that all the world would want to sample and share their wine and know the vineyard owner.

It was a beautiful plan. But as Isaiah's prophecy made clear, something went terribly wrong. Even though God kept God's side of the bargain, providing everything the people could possibly need both physically and spiritually, the people did not grow in faithfulness and service the way they were supposed to. Instead of becoming lush grapes that would make the world take notice, they had become what the NRSV calls "wild" grapes. It's an inadequate translation at best, because the root word used here doesn't mean "the pretty little grapes you sometimes see growing on vines covering trees while out walking." The underlying root word here means "to stink;" it's used in *Exodus* to describe how the Nile smelled after Moses cursed it and all the fish died. (Ex. 7:22). In other words, God wasn't accusing the people of being too small or too sloppy; God was accusing the people of having run wild to the degree that they were rotten, sour and stinky.

According to the end of the love song which captures the indictment, the main way their stinkiness was evident was that instead of producing justice, they produced bloodshed, and instead of producing righteousness, they produced the kind of cries associated with anarchy, covetousness, and oppression. Again, the poetic power of this accusation is a bit lost in translation because there's a visible and aural play on words in the Hebrew that isn't carried over into the English. Justice is *mishpat* and bloodshed is *mispah*. Righteousness is *tsedequah*, whereas outcry is *tse-quah*. So, the text says: "Instead of *mishpat*, you gave me *mispah*, and instead of *tsedequah*, you gave me *tse-quah*." It's kind of like God saying today: "I expected Dom Perignon, but you gave me Dom Deluise," if Dom Deluise were a criminal, not a silly, old comedian.

In the verses which follow today's reading, the charges of injustice and unrighteousness are flushed out with some specific examples of greed, drunkenness, gluttony, false witness, and exploiting and oppressing the poor. The nose on this wine stank indeed. History tells us that in the 8<sup>th</sup> Century BCE when Isaiah was prophesying, growing opportunities for foreign trade had caused a major shift in how the Southern Kingdom of Judah did business. Up until that point, most people lived on small farms, which grew a variety of crops for local sale, and supported the farmers who lived on them. But when the wealthy and powerful discovered that they could make a big profit on certain items in foreign trade, they began stealing the farms through over-taxation and land appropriation. Then they merged the farms together to make great single crop-

agribusinesses. The farmers had to work like slave labor on what used to be their land, barely surviving, while the rich got richer, greedier, and more self-indulgent. It's a pattern we are not unfamiliar with in our age.

In Isaiah's age, the Exile was supposed to teach the people their lesson. But as Jesus made clear when he reworked Isaiah's love song into his "parable of the tenants," there were still plenty of God's people who had not yet gotten the wildness out of their systems. Jesus added some new characters into the story. Instead of there being just a vineyard owner and a bad vine, Jesus added his servants, his son, and tenants who were supposed to work the vineyard. As a result, instead of ending up with a lesson about 8<sup>th</sup> Century stinky grapes, he ended up with an allegory about God's relationship with Israel both before and after the exile. The Jewish authorities were the tenants who were supposed to care for their Lord's vineyard. But whenever God sent people to check on their work, i.e. the prophets, they rejected and killed them. Then when God sent God's own son, according to the parable, they turned against him and sought to kill him too to steal his inheritance. So, God decided to give the vineyard to other tenants. By telling this story, Jesus foreshadowed his own pending death, and the Gospel being shared with the Gentiles.

Both the song and the parable have "gotcha" moments when the listeners go from condemning the way the vineyard owner is treated, to discovering they are the perpetrators of the bad behavior themselves. Both lessons make it clear that the people are being unfruitful by being unjust and unrighteous. But apart from learning some history and recognizing that our world still stinks of rotten grapes, what can we, who try faithfully through the Church to be a good grapes learn from these stories? We are not trying to be wild, nor are we trying to kill the vineyard owner's son. Is there still a lesson for us in these texts?

Obviously, I think the answer to that question is yes, or I wouldn't be preaching on them. I think both of these lessons invite us to think very carefully not just about what we are doing individually and collectively to produce a crop of justice and righteousness for the Lord, the texts also invite us to consider what it is in ourselves that makes us resistant to being cultivated by God. Why is it, when God has given us everything including God's son, we still dismiss so many of God's teachings as impractical? Why is it, when God has shown us the way to thrive, we, like so many human beings who have gone before us, still prefer our own way?

If we look to the prophets for guidance, we discover rather ironically, that one of the reasons human beings have been unfruitful is because God has blessed us so richly. One of the sins that the prophets accused the people of Israel of committing with great frequency is the sin of apostasy, that is, forgetting about God and their promises. The vineyard God had given them, the Promised Land, was so ideal that once the people got settled, they no longer felt the acute dependence upon God that they had either in slavery or in the Sinai wilderness. Life was good, the land was fertile. The more time that passed the more all that scary business of crossing the Red Sea and needing to live on miraculous manna disappeared into the back recesses of their memories. They stopped living in gratitude, and began to take their blessings for granted instead.

We have seen firsthand in our own age how the entitlement-thinking of the rich and powerful leads to rotten grapes for everyone. We have seen how the greed of some leads to the suffering of many. Yet you don't have to be a corrupt CEO or greedy in any extreme way to forget God when life is good. All you have to be is comfortable. Most people are inclined to pray when feeling desperate, threatened and afraid. But when all seems well, when you're feeling on top of your game, then it's easy to allow prayer and spiritual faithfulness to fall by the wayside. When things are going well, your successes feel like your own. When things are going well, the times when God intervened in the past to help you cope with challenges fade into distant memory. That's why the practice of gratitude is so critical. It not only keeps us from becoming the kind of greedy people who willingly oppress others, it also keeps us connected to the God who has blessed us so richly. Gratitude reminds us of who we were made, and saved to be.

Another sin the prophets spoke of often was idolatry. We tend to think of idolatry as the worship of shiny objects and little statues. But underlying the worship of everything from objects to rock stars, politicians to family, is a spiritual and emotional struggle for peace of mind, acceptance, autonomy, and control. We want to be accepted, we want to be associated with success; and we want to be the masters of our own fate. The people in Isaiah's day were no different. The Promised Land was surrounded by other nations, and filled with Canaanites who worshiped their own gods, and lived according to different standards. The people of Israel wanted to be like everyone else. God had given them rules and community practices to make them distinct; but they wanted to fit in. God told them to trust, but they wanted to be in charge. Therefore, in effect, even when they were worshiping foreign gods, in their hearts they were really just worshiping themselves. The Pharisees whom Jesus addressed with his parable did this too. They thought they were protecting tradition, but they were really protecting their own power. They wanted to be in the driver's seat because they trusted their judgment of who and what was good more than anyone else's.

Charles Swindoll learned of the human inclination to do this when he was only a teenager working a paper route.<sup>2</sup> He had spent an afternoon folding 200 newspapers and was tired. So, on the way home, he noticed that if he biked over someone's lawn, it would be a shortcut through neighborhoods that would save him from having to bike all the way down the street. The first day he biked across the lawn, he felt a bit guilty because the yard of this particular house was very beautiful and meticulously tended by its owners. But he figured one time wouldn't do any lasting damage. Then the next afternoon, he did it again, with less guilt because by then he knew from experience how convenient the shortcut was. He rationalized it as not being a big deal. It was just grass and the neighbors were too uptight. After two weeks, his bike's tires had begun to wear a narrow path across the yard. By the end of the third week, the home owners put up a sign that said, "Keep off the grass- no bikes." They all but put his name on the sign. But by that point the route had become a habit, and although part of him still felt guilty, another part of him felt oddly challenged by the sign. Who were they to tell him where he could bike, the grass police? He didn't need to follow their rules. He would bike wherever he wanted to because he was his own man.

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<sup>2</sup> Swindoll, Charles R., Swindoll's Ultimate Book of Illustrations & Quotes (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 165-66.

We can roll our eyes and say, “Teenagers!” at his story. But the point of both of today’s texts is that his story is basically our story. Humanity has been trapped in a tortured spiritual adolescence for millennia. God made us in God’s image, as chips off the old block designed to witness to God’s love. God told us and showed us what to do for a peaceful world ordered and operated with justice and righteousness. When we still didn’t get it right, God sent us prophets to tell us when we were going out of bounds, and even God’s own son. But still humanity says, “You’re not the boss of me.” Still we say, “My friends understand me better.” Still we say, “I deserve this,” more than “Thank you” or “Please show me how to share this?” It’s so foolish, so destructive, and so not who we were made to be. We are choosing to grow sour stinky grapes when we could be growing wine that gladdens the human heart. It makes no sense.

But as children grow up, and stop rebelling, and discover that their parents actually knew what they were talking about and created rules for them for a reason, so can we. We can keep off the grass and grow on the trellises God has created specifically for us; we can tend the vineyard with love and gratitude, and harvest a crop that makes the whole world raise a glass in a toast. We just need to turn our self-centeredness into an asset, by recognizing that now more than ever, it is in our best interest to do so, because like the lawyers for PG&E, we will have to drink whatever we create. By the mercy of God, who in Christ did not end up taking the vineyard away from anyone, but only invited more tenants to come and help, let us sing a loved song to our beloved as we work and serve each day, a song which has no “gotcha” in the end, only a joyful refrain of grace, justice and love. Amen.