

Bible Study
Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 22, Year A
October 8, 2017

[RCL:] Isaiah 5:1-7; Psalm 80:7-14; Philippians 3:4b-14; Matthew 21:33-46

Isaiah 5:1-7

In this reading, we hear the consequences of God's deep disappointment. Regardless of the goodness of God's creation and the abundance of God's provision for God's people, all this careful work and love has not yielded good fruit. Instead it has brought forth "bad grapes." God provided and Israel did not hold up their end of the covenant. God's threats of destruction and wrath are possible for me to understand on a human level, but make me very uncomfortable when it comes to God. However, hearing of God's heartbreak and disappointment does make me mindful of how what I do impacts not only me and others, but also God's self. With the gifts I have been given, I am accountable to all to use them justly and rightly.

Psalm 80:7-14

As Psalm 80 responds to the Isaiah passage, one can hear a dialogue going across these two readings. God issues the complaint against Israel in Isaiah. Then, after danger, destruction and hardship, Israel reaches back out to God. The psalmist remembers how God once tended and cared for Israel. This suggests that the tending and restoration of Israel is about more than rebuilding with bricks and mortar, but that it has to do with repairing a strained, or even broken, relationship with God. There is a deep trust in God's own faithfulness to Israel expressed, which gives voice to the hope that whatever may be broken and lost can only be restored with God's help and care.

Philippians 3:4b-14

Paul's account in this reading from Philippians shows how his world was completely turned upside down by Jesus. As much as Paul was transformed, there is a lot of the zeal and passion in Saul the Pharisee that remains in Paul the Apostle. Paul admits that he had utmost confidence in his righteousness and faithfulness as a Pharisee. He lived out those beliefs fiercely. Paul tells of his radical transformation from trusting in his own abilities to be a faithful follower to acknowledging that all his trust and confidence must rest in God alone. His conversion included the understanding that righteousness, grace and faith are all gifts from God. In Philippians, we hear of Paul's passionate faith in Christ Jesus. His story of conversion reveals that while we may be transformed into new life in our faith, we do not necessarily lose those essential parts of ourselves that may be offered up in service to the spreading of the Gospel and following Christ.

Matthew 21:33-46

Who do you imagine you are in this parable? Do you feel like a persecuted messenger? Have you been the persecuting tenant? Do you wonder if you are producing fruits of the kingdom or falling and stumbling all over the cornerstone?

Today's readings illustrate from a variety of perspectives a desire for and resistance to relationship with God. God's people throughout the ages, not only in the Bible have rejected God, Christ and God's other faithful messengers. We hear from Paul in Philippians that this is a risk worth taking for the sake of the Gospel. God's desire for reaching and reconciling humanity goes so far as to send God's own Son, God's self to reach us, even if it means a humiliating death on a cross. Threats of God laying waste to Israel (in Isaiah) and of being broken or crushed by the cornerstone (in Matthew) are unsettling and challenging. Yet the pleas of the psalmist and the radical transformation of Paul give me hope. In the brokenness in our relationships with God and each other, where faith still rests in God, there is hope in restoration and resurrection.

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