

PENTECOST: ALIVE IN THE SPIRIT OF HOPE

Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost

October 2, 2005

Proper 22

Isaiah 5:1-7

Psalm 80:7-15

Philippians 3:4b-14

Matthew 21:33-46

You surely don't mean ME?!

The Isaiah and Matthew texts have two important things in common. In the first place, they both use a vineyard as their subject. These two texts describe the care with which a certain owner built and cared for the vineyard, clearing away the stones, planting good vines, putting a fence around it, and placing a watchtower in the vineyard for security.

In the second place, both texts use a powerful rhetorical style to make their point. The style of the argument is subtle and inviting, much like a storyteller who draws an audience into the words of the story. In so doing, these two texts ask the hearers to draw their own conclusions from the words. The surprise is that, when the hearers reach a clear conclusion, they have ultimately judged themselves!

The text from Isaiah is usually called the Song of the Vineyard, a beautiful poem in which God, the vinedresser, takes special care of a vineyard. At harvest time, however, God finds a field of bad grapes, not good grapes! The poem goes on to accuse Israel (the vineyard) of encouraging prejudice and wickedness rather than justice and fairness. Surely the Israelites who first heard this prophetic text would not have expected to be accused of such wrongdoing. They were, after all, the prized possession of God!

The text from Matthew is similar. This parable leaves the religious leaders speechless when they realize that Jesus is equating them with the wicked tenants who refuse to take care of the vineyard. Rather than tending the vines and sharing the harvest with the owner, they repeatedly abuse and kill the workers who come to collect the owner's share. These religious leaders, says Jesus, are just as bad because they strive to make themselves look good while beating everyone else down for their imperfections. How could we, these religious leaders surely asked themselves, be accused of such things?

The unsettling nature of these texts reminds us that we are not exempt from wrongdoing. We, like those Israelites who heard Isaiah and those religious leaders who heard Jesus, are never far from standing in need of correction. Just when we think we are on the road to perfection is precisely the time to stop and take a long look at what we do and what we're about.

Every farmer and gardener knows that a weed or a thistle can spring up anywhere overnight. In the same way, acts of hostility and hatred can unexpectedly take root in the most innocent of persons.

Read these two texts again, putting yourself among those who stand accused by the words. Then take a careful look at your own vineyard of works. And be prepared to find some attitudes and actions the vineyard owner wouldn't much like.

This week's reflection was prepared by Steve Berneking, Ph.D., who serves on the staff of the American Bible Society as Translations Officer in the Nida Institute for Biblical Scholarship.

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This week we remember to pray for the work of the Bible Societies in: Bangladesh – With thanks to God for new Scripture products, including a Student Bible, the Lion Children's Bible, and the TAZI Bible, and with prayers for the completion and dedication of the first Garo (Abeng) New Testament and for the dedication of the Revised Bawm Bible; India – With thanks to God for the new Scriptures published in 2004, and with prayers for translations in progress in 15 languages and the new media projects underway, including an audio Good News for new language groups, and the teachings of Jesus in audio format in Tamil. With prayers for Bhutan, that the Scriptures will be accessible to believers and seekers there. Nepal – With thanks to God for faithfulness in sustaining Bible work in Neap, and with prayers for the spiritual growth and protection of Christians in Nepal, especially those living in remote areas, and with prayers for lasting peace in Nepal.

Activity Corner: "Grapevine" Prayers

Supplies needed: Bible; purple or light green construction paper; green construction paper; white drawing or construction paper; scissors; glue or paste; pencils or pens.

Cut out 15 circles (1 in. diameter) and paste the circles (slightly overlapping one another), in the shape of a bunch of grapes, onto a sheet of 8-1/2 x 11 in. white drawing paper held lengthwise (5 circles across the top, 4 underneath, then 3, 2, 1). For a larger bunch of grapes, cut out 28 circles and begin with 7 circles across the top. Write your first name in the circles (1 letter per circle). Adorn the top of the grapes with green leaves cut out from construction paper. Across the bottom, copy Psalm 80:14,15 from whatever translation of the Bible is being used. Read together Psalm 80:7-15. Encourage members of your household to examine their own "vineyard of works" and, on the back of the sheet, to write a prayer asking for God's forgiveness and help in overcoming any wrongdoings.