

Isaiah 5:1-7

Let me sing for my beloved

*my love-song concerning his
vineyard:*

My beloved had a vineyard

on a very fertile hill.

He dug it and cleared it of stones,

and planted it with choice vines;

he built a watchtower in the midst of it,

and hewed out a wine vat in it;

he expected it to yield grapes,

but it yielded wild grapes.

And now, inhabitants of Jerusalem

and people of Judah,

judge between me

and my vineyard.

*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?

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.

I will make it a waste;

it shall not be pruned or hoed,

*and it shall be overgrown with briers
and thorns;*

I will also command the clouds

that they rain no rain upon it.

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!

Isaiah 11:1-5

*A shoot shall come out from the stump
of Jesse,*

*and a branch shall grow out of his
roots.*

The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him,

*the spirit of wisdom and
understanding,*

the spirit of counsel and might,

*the spirit of knowledge and the fear of
the Lord.*

His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord.

He shall not judge by what his eyes see,

or decide by what his ears hear;

but with righteousness he shall judge the poor,

and decide with equity for the meek of the earth;

he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth,

and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.

Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist,

and faithfulness the belt around his loins.

To say that he was just an ordinary gardener would be to say that Michelangelo was just an ordinary painter. Gardening wasn't just his hobby or even his vocation – it was his passion.

Bringing forth order where there had only been chaos, bringing forth beauty where there had only been a mess, bringing forth life where there had only been emptiness, that was what he lived for.

He loved nothing more than to take a piece of land – the rockier and drier and more bramble-infested the better – and clear it and till it and work

it until it became a place of beauty and blessing.

He didn't create gardens for his own enjoyment – he created them so that people from all walks of life, from the very oldest to the very youngest, could be blessed by them. Gardening, you might say, was his love language.

Long, long ago, he came across a piece of land on a fertile hilltop, and he decided that it was the ideal place for creating a vineyard. Creating vineyards was one of his favorite ways to garden, because vineyards produce grapes, and grapes make wine, and in a vineyard, not only can you see and smell and touch beauty and goodness, you can taste it, too.

So he set to work building his vineyard on the fertile hill. It was dirty and sweaty work as he cleared the rocks and turned the soil, but he was never one to be afraid of a little sweat and dirt. Yet even as he cleared the rocks and turned the soil, he did it gently. Anyone the love with which he approached his work.

And then he carefully selected and planted choice vines. He planted them by hand in the fertile soil with all the tenderness of a father tucking a newborn baby into a crib. Then he took all those stones that he had cleared and built a wall around his garden to keep out the deer and the varmints. And then he built a watchtower in the middle of it, so that he could sit in the middle of his beloved vineyard and watch it grow.

He took the remaining stones and built a winepress, and while he laid each stone into place, he imagined the sweet wine that his vineyard would yield, and how the fruit that his vineyard produced would be a blessing to people who would come from near and far to enjoy it.

When he was finished, he sat back and looked at what he had created, and he smiled. It was a beautiful vineyard, and the love and tenderness of the gardener was evident at every turn. All that was left to do now was to wait for the grapes to come in.

But when the first grapes finally began to appear on the vines, he frowned. Something was off. The grapes were not lush and full and bright, but small and hard. He plucked one off the vine and popped it in his mouth, and his frown became a grimace. The grape wasn't sweet and juicy, but dry and sour. These grapes were inedible, and certainly wouldn't be worth wasting on the winepress.

Maybe it was just a bad season. So the gardener waited for a new crop to come in, but again, the grapes were sour and bitter. And the next season, too.

The gardener began to question himself. Bad fruit must be the result of a bad farmer, right? But no, the gardener had done everything possible to create the conditions for a perfect vineyard. He had poured himself into his work, only to end up with nothing but sour, bitter grapes.

And the gardener looked at all the work he had done – at the stones set in the wall and the watchtower and the winepress – and he thought about how long he had labored to build that vineyard – and tears came to his eyes.

He had such high hopes that this garden would be a source of blessing, a source of joy, a reflection of his love and tenderness for all the world. He had such high hopes for juicy, plump, delicious grapes – but the year after year, the yield was bitter and sour.

He was so frustrated. His love had not been returned. His expectations had not been met. Every time he looked at his vineyard, his heart broke a little more.

And it got to the point that it hurt his heart just to even look at it. So he decided to knock down the wall and let the deer and the varmints have their way. He decided to let the weeds and the thorns and the kudzu take over. As he shut off the water, tears fell from his face, because it was all so disappointing and heartbreaking.

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 only bloodshed. He expected righteousness, but heard only a cry.

Before long, that vineyard had all but disappeared from that fertile hilltop. In fact, if you didn't know any better, you would have never guessed that there had once been a garden there at all. It

looked like just any other patch of brambles and thorns and varmint-infested kudzu.

But even then, the gardener couldn't stop thinking about that vineyard. Every time he passed by that little piece of land, he remembered what was once there, and he couldn't stop seeing in his mind's eye what it could still be.

It was foolishness, really. It was just a big pile of brambles and rocks and thorns and stumps. But it was his pile of brambles and rocks and thorns and stumps. And try as he might, as much as maybe he should have, he just couldn't quit it for good. And so the gardener made a decision. No longer would he just tend the vineyard. He would plant his feet in the soil and become the vine himself.

And where that garden had been, way, way down underneath all the thorns and sticks and mess, where the light of day barely reached, there was this one old tree stump. It had once been the foundation of a mighty tree, but now it was just an old, dried up stump.

And way, way down, among the brambles and the briars and the thorns and the varmints, in the hollow of this old tree stump that looked for all the world like it was dead for good, was this tiny green shoot of a thing.

It was so far down that the light barely reached it, but isn't that the way new life always begins - in the darkness

of the womb, or the darkness of the soil, or the darkness of the tomb?

Well, that little shoot began to grow into a little branch. And that little branch began to grow into a little vine.

And many years later, in an upper room on that same fertile hilltop, the gardener would gather for supper with those he loved more than anything in the world, even though he knew one of them would betray him that very night. And he would take bread, and give thanks for it, and break it, and give it to them and say, "Take, eat, this is my body, given for you, do this in remembrance of me."

And then, the gardener would take a cup, and he give thanks for it, and pour out the sweetest tasting wine you ever did taste, and he would say, "Drink of this, all of you, for this is the cup of the new covenant, poured out in my blood, for the forgiveness of your sins. I expected justice, but saw only bloodshed. I expected righteousness, but heard only a cry. My heart has been broken over you time and time again. But a shoot springs from the stump of Jesse, and I won't ever, ever give up on you. Drink of this, all of you, in remembrance of me."

"I am the true vine, and you are the branches. Those who abide in me, and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me, they can do nothing. You did not choose me, but I chose you, and I appointed you to go and bear fruit that will last."

The mystery of the gospel,
friends, is that the gardener so loves his
vineyard, the gardener so wants the
vineyard to be a place of blessing and
nurture, that the gardener himself
becomes the vine.

The mystery of the gospel,
friends, is that through the waters of our
baptism, the gardener grafts us into his
very body. Apart from him, we can do
nothing. But in and through him, we
can do all things.

We belong to the vine, who is the
gardener. And the fruit of the Spirit is
love, joy, peace, patience, kindness,
generosity, faithfulness, generosity, and
self-control. May we go into our worlds
and bear fruit worthy of the vine to
which we have been grafted in our
baptisms this day.

Thanks be to God. Amen.