

Sermon Text – Sunday, August 17, 2025 – Pastor Paula Kraus

1st Reading: Luke 12:49-56; 2nd Reading: Hebrews 11:29-12:2
Scripture for Message: Isaiah 5:1-7 “the vineyard”

Isaiah directs his words, God’s message, to an agrarian culture – grapes grow best in regions like Judah so metaphors using vineyards and farming would have significance for them. In agriculture, the solution for a vineyard that does not produce good fruit is to prune heavily or let the vines die and then replant. Aggressive pruning can revitalize unproductive vines by removing old, unfruitful wood and promoting new growth. In cases where vines are old, diseased, or unsuitable for the location, replanting them with new rootstock and cutting them, or grafting new vines onto healthy rootstock can be necessary.

The vineyard in this metaphor reminds me of one that is struggling to produce a viable crop – instead, the crop is sour grapes. It is the struggling vine that places its energy into producing fruit for the sake of survival – that is God’s desire, not that the people struggle but that God’s people produce “good fruit.”

We need to give this some context – the people of the time would probably well understand the first part of our reading – sure if a vineyard isn’t producing good fruit, cut it down, destroy it, or let it go wild. Then the truth and meaning are spoken (v.7) – the vineyard is the house of Israel. Isaiah’s message from God is a warning to the people of Israel regarding unjust practices and about God’s response to the cries of the oppressed. God has cared for, nurtured and protected the people of Israel yet repeatedly they fail to adhere to God’s exacting standards of righteousness and faithfulness. So now the pruning begins.

Because God expected justice but saw bloodshed and expected righteousness but heard cries – Isaiah tells the people that God intends to bring destruction by tearing down the vineyard’s protection and allowing its enemies to overtake it. In this metaphor the vineyard is the

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city of Jerusalem and the people of Israel. We know that Jerusalem is the city of God and is therefore of utmost importance to God. We also know that God's divine requirement is that the people exhibit justice, righteousness, and faithfulness. God demands righteousness; therefore, Isaiah gives the prediction of God's wrath in destruction and judgment. The prophet wants his readers to know that apart from a radical change of behavior, the only way for hope to be realized is through the fire.

God, referred to in this metaphor as "my beloved," is the cultivator of the vineyard. The cultivator removes the stones, plants the choicest of vines and builds a wall to protect it from predators, showing the cultivator's love for what is created. God protects and nurtures the vineyard, expecting a "right" response. God continues to call back God's people, waiting for them to turn their faces toward God. God continues to love yet also disciplines the people, the vineyard.

We are God's creation, created to love and respond to God. "God created us to bear fruit. Loving more and giving more of ourselves is what it means to be the people of God"¹ The response God desires, commands of us, is actually known to us – "love God with all our hearts, with all our souls, with all your strength, and with all your mind; and love your neighbor as yourself." That is what a follower of Jesus Christ is called to do, that is how followers of Christ are called to live in the kingdom.

We read from Luke's Gospel the words of Jesus – "I came to bring fire to the earth." Jesus felt the agony of knowing that God's chosen people were not living up to their potential and were not bearing good fruit. Jesus warned his followers that he would bring division to the earth. I think what he tells them is pertinent to our

¹ Robert A. Ratcliff. "Proper 15, Isaiah 5:1-7; Connecting the Reading with the World" *Connections: Year C*, Vol. 3. Eds. Green, Long, Powery, & Rigby. WJK. 2019. Print. 236-237.

Sermon Text – Sunday, August 17, 2025 – Pastor Paula Kraus

times as well “You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?”

God has told us, and Jesus shows us how to live in God’s kingdom. The scriptures give us warnings – do we think the prophets’ messages do not apply to this age? Do we think what God desires from humanity has changed over the past several thousand years? God demands righteousness! Now, I don’t think that we can look at events that happen in our world and point fingers saying, “That is God’s judgment.” I don’t think that God works that way – I do, however, believe that judgment and divine punishment often mean arriving at the end of the trail we have blazed for ourselves. I believe that God may not save us from the consequences of our own folly, and often, that is punishment enough. As God allows God’s people to struggle, God’s people draw closer and grow deeper in faith – a struggling vine often produces the best fruit.

Nevertheless, how can we stand by and not know how to interpret the present time? How can we claim to be ignorant of God’s desire for humanity? To quote the writer of Hebrews, which was read this morning, “Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us.” We have more than two thousand years of teaching and a great cloud of witnesses known to us who have been examples for us, showing us how to live. If we choose, as did those people of Israel the prophet’s words address, to grow sour grapes and become unproductive vines we should know what consequences to expect.

How do we then live as believers and followers of Christ in the world today? What does a church or individuals in it do to produce good fruit? How can we realistically interpret the present time for the benefit of the followers of Christ? It is quite simple I believe – Love as

Sermon Text – Sunday, August 17, 2025 – Pastor Paula Kraus

Jesus loved; live as if you KNOW you are part of the family of God; treat others the way they want to be treated; and realize that the struggle is often the consequence of our own actions. Jesus asks us to be like the disciples he sent to proclaim the message “The kingdom of heaven has come near.” Jesus asks us to serve others and put others before ourselves. Jesus asks us to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, minister to the imprisoned because what we do for the least of these among us we do for Jesus himself.

Look, we know these things are hard. We know that there are times when we feel like the world has let us down, when the struggle is more than we can bear and when it’s hard to believe that God is always beside us helping us overcome. There are times when we cry out because we don’t believe it is our actions that have caused the yield of wild grapes, and more than likely we are right. It is ok to lament the circumstances of our lives – it is not only okay but it is also the right thing to cry out against injustice. Hear the words from the Psalms read in our call to worship “Rise up, O God, judge the earth; for all the nations belong to you!” “Restore us, O Lord of hosts; let your face shine, that we may be saved.” But remember too that these words were a call for God to rescue all the weak and needy, to give justice to all the weak and all who walk around in darkness – the psalmist’s words are a call for justice for all, not just the rich or the ones who look like us.

Our scriptures contain the assurance of a loving, nurturing, ever-present God. Although we know that there will be consequences for humanities’ failures, we also know that through the Holy Spirit of God we will have strength for the struggle. If we abide in Jesus as Jesus abides in us and follow his teachings, we can endure the pruning of the vine until good fruit is the product. We know that God promises judgment for the whole earth, but God also promises restoration and renewal. God sent Jesus to teach us how to live, to show us who God

Sermon Text – Sunday, August 17, 2025 – Pastor Paula Kraus

is, and to warn us regarding the consequences of lives that do not produce good fruit.

Maybe you all have seen in the news what can happen when we do not live as God intended – when we cheat and lie and do exactly what we want without considering consequences. Just a couple of weeks ago it was all over the news about the couple at the Coldplay concert. This couple acted as if what they were doing had no consequences – innocently as they were attending a concert their faces appeared on the Kiss Cam. However, the last thing they wanted was to be seen in such a public forum. They were married but not married to each other, so they tried to hide. Now the gentleman is without a job and family and the woman living with some shame – not to mention their faces and stories being the topic of national conversation, jokes, and gossip!

Imagine what our lives would be like if we truly lived them with the goal of producing good fruit. Imagine what it would look like if we lived according to God's will and not our own. We live in a culture where when we walk out of our homes everything we say and do can be "caught on camera" either someone's cell phones or the "eye in the sky." We've all seen the recordings of people acting in inappropriate ways – famous people as well as the average Jack or Jill. Sure, we might think our privacy is being invaded when that happens, but reality is we have no real expectations of privacy in the public spaces of our world today.

So, Christian people – act not only like the world is watching but also like God is watching. Be part of the vineyard that produces the good fruit that is God's will for all of us. We are all struggling vines and because of God's pruning and nurturing nature we grow stronger in our relationship with God. Picture a world where everyone had the goal of producing good fruit and avoided sour grapes!