

Sermon “Unexpected Gardeners”
October 4th, 2026
Kirk of St James
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My first experience with gardens involved picking potato bugs off the plants in mom and dad's garden for five cents a beetle, not glamorous work and to be honest I hated it, but I was saving up for a pony so beetles it was. While I deeply admire gardeners, and both of my siblings have turned out to be tremendous gardeners, I have not developed a knack for it. You might remember the ill-fated tomato plant I grew on the back porch a few years ago, it turned into a massive bush and I didn't realize it needed to be cut back so in the end while it was about 7 feet tall I only picked about three mini tomatoes off it and that was it. Few things are as disappointing as gardening failures when you put in the time and hope then end up empty handed.

When we plant a garden a lot of intentionality goes into it. The quality of the soil, the time it takes to clear weeds and rocks, making sure you plant things far enough apart and that nothing is in direct competition with what is growing next to it. If it is too dry, we water it, and we make sure weeds don't choke out new growth. There is also a lot of hope when we plant a garden. We look forward to the day we can harvest our tomatoes to make salsa and gather the early produce for a pot of hodge podge. We look forward to the joys of flowers and the colours and scents they bring into our lives. So, if things don't sprout, or seeds we planted thinking it was one thing comes up as another it is disappointing. It feels like it is a waste of time, money, and energy.

The same is true for our vineyard owner who has done everything possible to grow perfect grapes and yet all the time and effort is lost. Instead of choice grapes for wine, wild grapes grow up. Wild grapes are small and tend to be bitter. They climb whatever is near them including trees and can choke out and kill both the trees and everything growing around them. If

you are expecting choice grapes and end up with wild grapes you are going to be bitterly disappointed. There is nothing to do but start over.

Verse one in Isaiah today explains this passage is written for Gods beloved, and he is feeling the pain and disappointment caused by the people of Israel. His faithful relationship with them has been ignored and neglected. The description of the vineyard shows the care and major expense that was taken when it was planted. The watchtower and the vat were built, the hedge to protect it but none of it mattered the people of Israel still grew wild. As one writer said “Israel and Judah have produced “wild grapes” that the owner of the vineyard did not intend, and the prophet did not plant. From losing a year’s crop to a loss of faithfulness, the vineyard is faced with ruin and left for briars and thorns. A people are faced with destruction as a consequence of what they have produced...Judah and Israel were to maintain their loyal relationship with God by treating others with honesty and equity while upholding justice. However, Judah and Israel allow the political and economic powers to divide the people and to pray upon the poor. No longer does righteousness flourish; rather, the people go “wild “in the fruit they produce. Where God intended justice, the people return bloodshed. Where God intended righteousness, the cry of the downtrodden is heard.”

This passage in Isaiah is interesting because it is echoed in the account, we read in Matthew today when Jesus is rebuking the pharisees and chief priests. In that case they had been taking advantage of the poor, unjust in their actions, and deaf to the pleas of the marginalized and vulnerable. In that case Jesus pronounces what will happen as a result. In Isaiah God tells the story of the vineyard owner in a such a way that he is asking them what they think. If the vineyard owner put in all this work and this is the result what else can he do? Why have the people turned away? There is frustration on behalf of God and the prophet. God and Isaiah have

done everything right and now they are stuck with the consequences of other people's choices. God is expressing a deep sense of grief in this account. He loves his people; he does everything he can for them but none of it seems to matter.

You know to be perfectly honest sometimes the vineyard references start to feel thin. I felt that way this week when I opened the readings. But in each story, we learn more about God and ourselves, and this week is not an easy message. We are reminded that when we are in relationship with God there are certain fruits, he hopes we bear--like justice, righteousness, compassion, and mercy. These are the words that rise out of the vineyard parables. I know there are times in my life, quite frequently where my self-absorption, apathy and inclination for comfort and routine mean I fall short of these things. I know that I am more wild grape than choice grapes. It is not easy to look at our lives and see those moments, but I think Isaiah would encourage us to, so that we don't lose sight of our relationship with God. So, we remember what fruit is important.

I had an experience a number of years ago now that I had totally forgotten and was reminded of this week. It started when we had a knock on our back door at 10 PM. It is not a usual occurrence and when we checked it was a local woman who was homeless and could not get into blooming house wondering if I could help her with a few necessities. I am not proud to say there were a lot of things that ran through my head. Discouraging coming to the house, not quite knowing what to do, feeling frustrated because it was so late, mad that it could have woke up the baby, a moment of fear when you don't know who is there. But I was literally reading a vineyard passage just before I opened the door. I was thinking like a Pharisee. How can I read things like this vineyard passage and how do I write sermons, to then turn away one of the most vulnerable when she needed help, just because it was an inconvenient time to help. Thanks to the

generosity of the Kirk family who have given to mission over the years we were able to square her around with what she needed. When I came out the door of the church where she was waiting, she had dead headed all the flowers in the bed by the door. She said she used to have a garden in Ontario that brought her joy and she asked if she could pick one. I don't tell this story today because I feel any sense of pride in what I did because let me tell you I was pretty sour grapes when I heard the knock, but she in the moment when I came out the door showed the care of a master gardener.

Friends God calls us to care for this vineyard together, and when we do, we usher in the kingdom of God. We have this incredible capacity to share love, joy, peace, and hope. We have a chance to live out our faith in the world not only in word but more importantly in action. May we answer the call of God who asks for nothing more than love, mercy, compassion, and righteousness, and turns it into the best wine possible.