

The Risk of Planting
Isaiah 5:1-7
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As I've gotten older, notice I didn't say either grown up or matured- just gotten older, I've realized that I like most people am someone who has any number of prejudices and even more obsessions. While I refuse to stand here and try to outline all of them, that would be too boring and too embarrassing, I will admit two. First, one of my prejudices – I believe that one of the failures of the clergy in mainline, liberal Protestant denominations is that we haven't confronted the challenge of teaching modern Biblical practices to our congregations. We look out at the faces of congregations and skirt around the issues of how one communicates, interprets, preaches a faith for the 21st Century whose foundational document, the Bible, was written at least 1900 years ago and some of it 2500 years ago at least. How do we confront a world of Google, twitter, and Skype with a faith originally fomented by people who couldn't read, write, and traveled almost exclusively on foot?

Secondly, one of my obsessions has become the notion that the Presbyterian Church has a life beyond this century. I have become convinced in and obsessed about how in Presbyterian Congregations in Wisconsin, there are people who dare to participate in a living faith which grows, changes, sometimes almost dies, is re-born and then begins anew to offer believers meaning, hope, pleasure, and respite. The nurturing of that faith is never easy, can't be taken lightly, nor denies anyone the opportunity to participate in the ongoing communal conversation. If these congregations have a fault it is that they bend too easily to the myth propagated by a media too lazy or too closed minded as it foments the idea that Christianity is a faith which seeks to get back to 1st Century Palestine or awaits the end of the world with glee. This fault is that we 21st Century Christians of the Presbyterian persuasion fail to confront such ideas and speak loudly that ours is a faith that looks honestly and openly at what it means to be a faith-filled people in this place at this time.

Now with that introduction, I want to spend a few minutes considering the passage we read from Isaiah. As we know, this portion of Isaiah, often referred to as 1st Isaiah for there are at least three different "books" to be found in the Bible's book of Isaiah, this part comes probably from about the 8th Century before the common era. That means it refers to a period of time some 2900 years ago. At this time, it is believed the people of Israel, the Jewish people were living in relative comfort and safety. However, among the people there arose those who believed they were called by God to challenge the people of faith to consider how they were failing to live out their faith. Thus, the people were confronted, though, by what can only be described as radical preachers we call prophets. Now they were radical because they went to the "root" or base of what they discerned as the people's failure – a failure to live out their faith. Standing in the midst of the people of faith, the prophet excoriates them for this failure.

I think it's important to pause here and remind ourselves that this book of the Bible as most if not all of the Bible records a message intended for the people of faith and not the community at large. As we listen to it, we ought listen with the knowledge that this isn't about how non-believers were acting but the failure of the people who were part of the faith community. Often

times, I fear we have the habit of thinking that the prophets were speaking to the community at large when in fact their main focus was the community of faith and its failures to respond appropriately to the presence and call of God. It is not that others have done all that is right but that the prophets were called to speak to the community of faith. The prophets offered a vision for the people of faith of how they ought be living out their faith as opposed to how they were actually doing it.

This passage begins like a love poem offering praise and exhortation and ends like a legal indictment. The beloved one builds a vineyard according to the best practices of the day. It has a fence and a watchtower as well as a vat to hold the newly harvested wine. And the grapes are planted and grow, the harvest awaits. There then comes the difficulty what had been expected to be the sweet or dry grapes turn out to be wild grapes or a better translation would be “stinking things”. The stinking things are essentially useless and not suitable as the basis of wine. And the passage ends with an explanation of it for those who missed the meaning – the vineyard is the people of faith, the people of Israel and they have been called or planted to do justice and righteousness but instead have chosen to ignore that call, their planting and done bloodshed and caused the oppression of those around them.

Please also note that the pericope or passage ends with the verbiage “heard a cry”. This phrase is almost identical to the one used in the Exodus story when God heard the people’s cry regarding their oppression in Egypt by the Pharaoh and his regime. Here the tables seem to have been reversed and it is the people of faith who are the oppressors and those whose cries are heard are those whom they are oppressing. The prophet doesn’t simply imply but accuses these formerly oppressed of having become the oppressors and it is their victims whose cries God now hears. Again, and finally, the prophet speaks to the people of faith regarding their behavior.

OK so what does that mean for us? I think there are a couple of lessons we might draw from it. First, this is a passage, a pericope which challenges any and all ideas that it is God who does justice, God who embodies righteousness. The passage is clear that the prophet believed that God CALLS God’s people to do justice and to embody righteousness. God is upset with the people not because they didn’t believe or failed to worship in the correct manner, but that they failed to heed God’s call. I hope as you listened to or read along with this passage the idea that God calls people to respond comes across strongly. What God is upset about, the prophet tells us, is that God has “Planted” people expecting one reaction, the metaphor is grapes, but instead discovers that what has “grown” are “stinking things”. Theologically what is apparent is that the prophet believed in God as creator or planter but also believed that God’s control was essentially an expectation, a call to people. The message is clear, WE are called to do justice and live out righteousness as God calls us to do. And God’s punishment or judgment will be known in that that call will be withdrawn and we will find ourselves in a situation of injustice and unrighteousness.

Now I find it interesting that the punishment or judgment is a punishment or judgment which is about relationality, about the societal environment in which we live. For it is an idea that God’s punishment is to be found in living in a society in which justice is not known, a society in which the righteous suffer. It is not that God reaches down and smites people but that the injustice and unrighteousness which is known by all and for believers the pain and suffering even if it is of

others is felt by those who believe in this call. Knowledge in faith becomes discomfort. And that discomfort is punishment for the believer.

What this leads us to is to acknowledge that we have a choice; we can decide to respond to God's call or to ignore it. The prophet doesn't see the situation of injustice and unrighteousness as God's fault, as God somehow or other failing to do something. Rather the situation has been created by the failure of the people, believers to do that which they are called to do, to be. In the Presbyterian tradition, we have institutionalized this idea by celebrating and affirming the priesthood of all believers which recognizes that all of us, each of us are called to construct and live out our faith. We don't believe or expect our church to "give" us faith. We participate in an institution which acknowledges and celebrates that each of us in conversation with the community of believers and the world constructs an understanding of what it is God calls us to do. As such our faith and our faith community is alive and changes, grows, is different today than it was yesterday. That is why within the church and each of its congregations the conversation continues and our worshiping communities are places of dialogue and sometimes dissent. This conversation of what it is God calls us to do is not a weakness of faith but strength. It is a foundational strength of the Presbyterian Idea that we all are responsible for discerning God's call and for maintaining the conversation regarding what that call is. Taking responsibility for our individual and communal faith leads us to celebrate such things as the discernment process in which we are involved. It enables us but also requires us to participate as listeners, learners, and theologians. WE are all called to converse about what we believe God calls us to be and to do. The prophet was a simple human called by God to offer the people hope, joy, theology. The prophet did so with courage, with commitment, with kindness, and with faith. May we fully participate in the development of this congregation's discernment of God's presence with the same joy, hope, theological wonder, and faith. It is that conversation and that continuing development of faith which I believe will enable us to assure that this congregation and this denomination will remain viable and relevant as we move ahead. AMEN.