

SERMON AT TRINITY UMC, WILMETTE, ILLINOIS

“WILD GRAPES”

August 15, 2010

TEXT: Isaiah 5:1-7

BY: Pastor Kirk Reed

It's the most unusual love song I have ever heard. It's a love song from God to us in the 5th chapter of Isaiah. Here are the words: “Let me sing for my beloved,” says the Lord, “my love song concerning his vineyard. My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. He dug . . . and cleared it of stones, and planted . . . choice vines; he built a watchtower . . . and hewed out a wine vat in [the vineyard]; he expected it to yield grapes, but . . .” (vv. 1-2).

Is there any word more wistful than the word “but”? He expected it to yield grapes, but . . . He planned to go to medical school, but . . . She wanted to be a grandmother, but . . . When the Cubs made the playoffs, they ordered tickets for the World Series at Wrigley Field, but . . . We prayed for peace in the Middle East, but . . . The word “but” indicates that our plans have failed. Our desires have been thwarted. Our prayers have not been answered in the way that we hoped. And so when God sings a love song containing the word “but,” it comes as a most unpleasant shock. “My beloved had a vineyard,” it says. “The owner expected it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes.” Bad fruit. A crop unfit for human consumption.

Have you ever tasted a Georgia peach? A fresh-from-the-tree Georgia peach? Last week I tasted a succulent, melt-in-your-mouth, farmer's-market-fresh northern peach that was so extravagantly juicy it could have come from my home state. But not all peaches are worthy of the name. There are grocery store peaches, for example, that are puny, hard, and bitter. They are not worth eating. That's what God is saying about the grapes that should be sweet and juicy, but instead they are runty and bitter.

The message is clear. In spite of the fact that we are loved by God, we have not lived up to our potential. We have settled for less than we could be. Our spiritual life is undeveloped. We are like wild grapes; that is to say, we have disappointed our Creator. “He expected it to yield grapes,” it says, “but . . .”

Is there any good news here? God is saying in verse 5: “And now I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard . . . it shall be devoured . . . it shall be trampled down.” And then in verse 6: “I will make it a waste.” Notice that final word: “waste.” When we waste God's gifts, we become a waste land. That sounds like bad news to me, until I remember that in this love song God is saying: “I love you so much that I must warn you. Do not waste your life. You are meant to be more than wild grapes. You can do something with your life that brings delight to the world.”

The question, of course, is “How?” How can we avoid the wild grapes experience of wasting our potential? How can we bear fruit that brings gladness to the heart of God? There are two requirements. First, know yourself. Second, forget yourself. It's a delightful paradox. Know yourself so that you can forget yourself, so that you can lose yourself, so that you can give yourself away. Both are essential.

Knowing yourself comes first. Each of us is an unrepeatable miracle of God. Nobody else is like you. Nobody else is like me. The challenge is to discover what makes each of us unique.

Once upon a time there was a school for animals. There were classes in running, swimming, and flying. To graduate you had to pass all three classes. The rabbit received an A in running, but he failed to graduate. "You can't swim, and you can't fly," they told him. The trout was praised for his swimming, but he failed the other classes. Even the eagle had to drop out before graduating. "Deficient in running; deficient in swimming," they told the eagle. What a foolish school! That is not how God has arranged the universe. The secret of life is to be who we are, not to copy someone else. God created me to be differently gifted, and the same is true of you. We all need to know: "Who am I?"

You may remember in the movie *Chariots of Fire* the young athlete from Scotland, Eric Liddell, is criticized by his devout sister for spending so much training for the Olympics, instead of serving God. In one of my favorite scenes, he says to her: "I believe that God made me for a purpose. When I run, I feel [God's] pleasure." When we are living up to our potential, we feel God's pleasure!

How, then, can we know ourselves? How can we discover the purpose for which we were created? Beginning August 29 – in two weeks – my Sunday morning class can help you answer that question. We will be using the book *Strengthsfinder 2.0*. I am confident that the result of that class will be knowing our strengths and feeling God's pleasure. Stay tuned.

But knowing myself is only half of the secret. I will never reach my potential until I give myself away. I must forget myself in order to find lasting joy. In the words of Jesus: "[T]hose who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it" (Matthew 16:25). What does that mean? The Bible is talking about egoland ("what's in it for me?") versus genuine caring ("what's in it for you?"). There is no abundant life in egoland.

Think about the movie *Mr. Holland's Opus*. Glenn Holland dreams of becoming a famous composer, but instead he spends his entire career teaching music to ordinary high school kids at John F. Kennedy High School. When Mr. Holland retires, he feels like a failure. He never accomplished his dream. With slumped shoulders he is leaving the school for the last time. But wait. He hears a noise in the auditorium. He opens the door and sees that hundreds of former students are there. One of them says, "Mr. Holland, don't you see? Your greatest composition is what you did with us, your students. Mr. Holland, look around you. We are your great opus! Mr. Holland, we are the music of your life."

When we first, know ourselves, so that we can then forget our own ego, we are able to bear fruit. Not wild grapes, but exquisite grapes, the best you have ever tasted. Can you hear God's love song? God is inviting all of us to experience abundant life.