**Philippians 3:4b-14 October 4, 2020**

***Heart Issues are Hard Issues: Bringing the Fruit of His Steadfast Love***

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

We continue our sermon series called, “Heart Issues are Hard Issues: a Sermon Series on Racial Healing in the Church and for the Community” this week looking at the sermon titled, “Bringing the Fruit of His Steadfast Love” written by Rev. Michael Grannis of the Michigan District.

 I ask that you bow your heads and fold your hands as we begin with a prayer.

*“Heavenly Father, bless us today with the presence of Your Holy Spirit within us. Prepare us to hear and take to heart Your Holy Word. Redeem us from our sinful fruit and produce the good fruits You desire to harvest in our lives. Strengthen our faith in Christ, so that we may let go of our earthly pride which labels others as our enemies. Control us by the love of Christ, displayed for us in the shedding of His precious blood, so that we might forget what lies behind and strain forward toward the goal of being worthy of the upward call of God. Through Jesus Christ, the true vine.”*

Amen.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

 Wild grapes … wild grapes are spoken of in our Old Testament lesson for today [Isaiah 5:1-7]. They are not spoken of kindly. They are the undesired, unexpected fruit of the LORD’s vineyard (His people).

 Have any of you ever had homemade wine? On a personal note I can remember a few experiences with homemade wine that I’ve had in my life. The best experiences were at my former parish in Kansas, where my wife and I were blessed to drink some of the sweetest, smoothest, and best blueberry wine we’ve ever had which was made for school auctions and other events by members of the church. The second experience I had was similar to this story shared by Pastor Grannis.

There is a pastor who, while serving as a vicar, had an experience in wine tasting he will not soon forget. One of his congregation members dabbled in wine making. This member had several homemade bottles on hand of a few different varieties. On one visit to the member’s home, the vicar was sent home with two bottles of wine. One of them was made from some grapevines the man had purchased and planted and cultivated in his garden. However, one of the bottles he marked as being “wild.” He told the vicar that he had found some grapevines growing wild along the fences of his property and decided he would make some wine with them. He had quite a few bottles of the “wild” wine, and the vicar was more than happy to take a bottle off of his hands and sample something that promised to be a unique experience. Well, unique it was. The “tame” variety was tasty enough. Not the best wine the vicar had ever tasted, but enjoyable. The “wild” wine, however, was a different story. The vicar was not easily put off or offended by most wines. That being said, this wine was made from “wild” grapes … and, he was not prepared for it. The wine was bitter. It was sour. It was … well, you know how sometimes people describe certain foods as having an “earthy” quality or flavor? Usually they mean it in a good way, right? Well, this had a “dirty” quality to it, in the worst possible sense. And none of this should reflect poorly on the winemaking skills of the congregation member. Again, the vicar had the “tame” wine by means of comparison. They were night-and-day different. There was not one redeeming quality of the “wild” wine.

What is the point of this story? Simply put, wild grapes are offensive. They are utterly unenjoyable, sickening, disgusting. They have no redeeming quality. And when you are the winemaker expecting something special, something enjoyable; when you have worked hard preparing the soil and pruning and harvesting; when you have pressed and filtered and prepared your wine for fermentation; when you have waited long weeks or months for your creation to come into its own, only to have it turn out to be a complete and utter waste—a waste of time, a waste of effort—that is an embarrassment and offense! Wild grapes don’t make for a proud winemaker, and those who partake of them aren’t too happy either.

But we are not talking about wine here. We are not talking about actual wild grapes. We are talking about God’s people. God’s people and the fruit produced in our lives. In the Isaiah passage, the wild grapes are held up by the prophet in his parable to represent the bad fruits produced by God’s people; fruits of injustice and of bloodshed. The prophet cries out against their evil ways. The people of God had abandoned His ways and as a result they had proclaimed war on God and the righteousness of God. They had made themselves enemies of God.

Similarly, in our Gospel reading [Matthew 21:33–46] we hear Christ rebuking the religious leaders of God’s people. They were set in place by God to tend the vineyard of His people. They were to cultivate and grow their faith, protecting them from the attacks of the devil and the tempting, sinful draw of our fallen world. They were to help produce the fruit God desired to see and then present Him with the bounty.

However, in their sin, the religious authorities pitted themselves and God’s people against God and His ways. They had become drunk on the desire to be honored—drunk with the power God had placed into their hands for the good of the people. They craved the comfort that the world offered over the righteousness of God. They allied themselves with the ways of the devil and the world and saw God and His ways (His very Salvation) as their enemy.

We see this same sinful pride described in the Epistle lesson as Paul explains all of the reasons he has for boasting in the flesh. As a Jewish man trained as a Pharisee under Gamaliel (the most notable rabbi of the Pharisees in his day), Paul had every reason to boast in his earthly pedigree. We see early on, before His conversion, that as Saul he took great offense at Jesus and any who believed in Him and followed His teaching. The way of Christ threatened the pride of Saul; it threatened the pride of the Pharisees and the scribes and the chief priests. It threatened the pride of the Jews, and Samaritans, and Gentiles alike. It threatened everyone from kings and governors to tax collectors and beggars. And why was that? Because Christ’s way—God’s way—is no respecter of persons.

God gives authority and influence not so that people would be honored, but so that people would use that authority and influence to honor and glorify Him. God gives knowledge and wisdom not for people to be big-headed but to reveal Himself as the giver of all that is true and good. God gives His Law and Gospel not to puff up His people, but to reveal our need for salvation and to reveal Jesus, our means of Salvation. All of these gifts from God are given to us for His glory and honor. Which brings us back to this time and moment in our world, truly, the reason we are meditating upon these particular sermons and this particular topic …

In our world today, issues of prejudice and injustice based on skin color and ethnic origin are in the spotlight once again. These deeply personal issues have caused people to take a stand and choose sides. People have made enemies of one-time friends, and allied themselves with others they once considered enemies. And it is easy to look around and see examples of self-professed followers of Christ doing very un-Christ-like things, and this is true of Christians on all sides of these issues.

Christians everywhere are identifying enemies of their cause and, as they are, they keep finding themselves on the wrong side of the battle line; they are standing up for and rallying behind injustice on one side of lawlessness or another … prejudice on one side or violence and destruction on the other. And all the while Satan is laughing and mocking us as the world falls apart … as we help to tear it apart.

Yes, we have an enemy in this world, but when we rally behind the causes of the world, we will undoubtedly end up mistaking our real enemy. And where does this misidentification come from? It comes from our own desire for glory and honor. It has its root in our own sinful inability to see people the way God sees them. It grows out of our sinful rebellion from the will of God, even as Satan (our true enemy) lashes out at us with every weapon at his disposal.

Like Isaiah’s wild grapes, or Christ’s vineyard tenants, God’s people today are under a real threat of finding ourselves opposing God, regardless of what earthly stance we may take on the issues of our day. However, God’s desire for us (His New Testament vineyard) is still the same as it was for His Old Testament people. God chose us to reveal His will and salvation to a world in need.

God wants us to live according to His will and ways, trusting in Him. He wants us to live in just ways. He wants to see us use whatever power or influence we have to help bring about justice and peace in the world. He does not desire to see us standing by, allowing innocent blood to be shed. He does not want us to be the reason for people to cry out. He wants us to promote what is right and to do what is right in our lives, no matter what position or influence we may be jeopardizing, or what power we may lack. He surely does not want us to be the ones inflicting violence, insult, and injury onto others. He does not want us to promote such behavior in others or to justify others for doing so.

No, God calls on His people to stand in the gap of hatred, bringing the fruit of His steadfast love. God calls on us to stand in the gap of injustice, bringing His faithfulness to bear. This is the good fruit He desires to see in the vineyard of His people. But it will make us a target for the attacks of Satan. It will make us hated by those set on division and destruction. But by remaining in the Word of Christ (connected to the true vine) God will clothe and equip us with His spiritual armor to withstand all that comes against us. Yes, through us God will be glorified even in these contentious times.

You see, God works in our world through means to communicate His steadfast love and faithfulness. In His grace and mercy, He chose to use the people of Israel, and when those grapes went wild He continued with His faithful plan to reveal Himself to the world and redeem all who would put their trust in Him through Christ. After all, this was His plan all along: to reveal Himself and produce His salvation through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ—God in the flesh.

Yes, God works through means. He worked salvation for us in the person of Christ. He uses the Word and Sacraments to produce and strengthen our faith in Him. And just as He formed and raised up the people of Israel to reveal Himself to the nations, He has cut off the fruitless branches of Israel and grafted into the ancient vine of Christ a new people, the Church. We are the branches whose purpose it is to produce the good fruits that our Vinedresser desires to see in our world. Does He need us to reveal and accomplish His will? No! But He chooses to use us for this good and gracious purpose.

The most impactful and meaningful way for Christians to heal the sinful divides in our world is through faithful, fruitful living. This is faith that others can taste. It is not tasted by explaining the grace of God to others, but by letting people experience the goodness of God through us. It is not tasted through our warring against those we disagree with, but by being loving, just, humble, and forgiving; through this kind of faithful living by God’s people, the world will be able to “taste and see that the LORD is good” (Psalm 34:8)

Standing up for what is right is important, but it is meaningless without right living. We are the branches of Jesus, the true Vine. God has created and cultivated the Church of Christ so that we might produce the good fruit of His will. He planted and cultivated us so that we might bear the fruit of His grace, mercy, and forgiveness, and apply it in the lives of those around us.

This Gospel of peace applied to us here in this service is for sharing with all people, every day, in your lives. It is to be shared in word and in deed. It is to be applied to those who call you friend and to those who see you as their enemy. May God prune each of us so that we would produce His good fruit more abundantly in our lives. Through each of us, may all people taste and see that the LORD is Good. Through Jesus Christ, the true vine.

Amen.

 Again, I ask that you bow your heads, fold your hands, as we conclude with prayer:

*“God of healing, great Vinedresser of Your people, forgive us and remove from us all our wild and bitter fruit. Keep us connected to Christ, the true vine, so that we might grow into His fullness and produce the fruit of justice, mercy, and peace that You desire to see in our lives. When we set ourselves against You and Your will, correct us gently with Your Law and restore us to You through the Gospel of Christ. May those who know us, come to know You through the fruitful lives we live. Guard us from Satan, our true enemy, and teach us Your ways so that all who see us as enemies may come to faith in Christ through our lives of witness and mercy. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.”*

The peace of God which surpasses all human understanding keep our hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Amen.