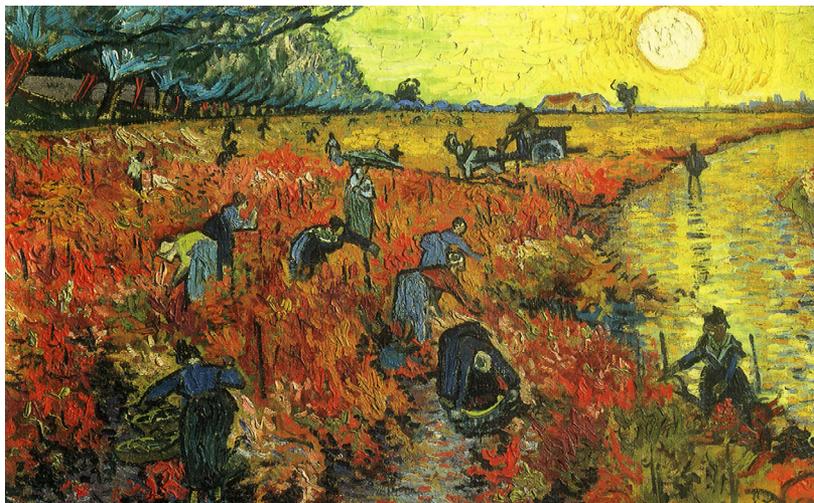


ST. JOHN'S AT DIOCESAN CENTER IGLESIA EPISCOPAL DE SAN JUAN

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LOVE SONG

The Rev. Andrew F. Kline

Text of a Sermon preached on the 18th Sunday after Pentecost

October 4, 2020

ISAIAH 5:1-7 | PSALM 80:7-14

PHILIPPIANS 3:4B-14 | MATTHEW 21:33-46

Some events shine a new light on everything. Some events change the conversation. The news that President Trump contracted Coronavirus was one of those events. As his schedule changed so did ours. As he had to look his beliefs and behaviors in a new light, so did we. As we hope and pray for his recovery, and the recovery of all those impacted by the recent disruption of this invisible enemy, each of us, no matter what perspective we have personally or politically, are once again reassessing what this pandemic has meant for our care for each other and the planet.

My dear wife, for one, has decided to deal with the stress of these last few months by tuning out the most heated and unresolvable political arguments. She has decided to inform herself on what she knows best. Good doctor that she is, she is constantly taking care of patients and clinics. When she takes a break, I often find her listening to a podcast or reading an article. From a little distance I see she is on YouTube. I can make out six people in lab coats and glasses. The nerd and geek vibe is oozing from the screen. What are you listening to? This Week in Virology! No doubt, gripping, entertaining stuff!

More or less I get daily an update on the very latest science on the virus. A tidbit about a new research paper here, a new therapy there. Being in the profession of public health, I wait for her observations about what that might mean for how we will face the challenge of the virus going forward. In the last few days, along with prayers for the President, it has been a time for the public health community to evaluate the soundness and effectiveness of its message.

Yesterday, This Week In Virology, discussed an editorial from two prominent MIT researchers: “the coronavirus was a perfect storm of systemic failures globally including government ineptitude, scientific ignorance and mis-prioritization, and abdication of medical training and preparedness to market driven forces.” All government leaders. All public health experts. All actors in the economy. All over the world. Enough blame to go around on all sides.

In our gospel lesson this morning, Jesus tells a parable that serves is his own editorial on the state of the union of God’s people. Instead of This Week in Virology, he gives us an episode of This Week In The Vineyard. It is an indictment of the corruption of the religious leaders.

Jesus’ parable is based on this well known passage of the prophet Isaiah. known as the Song of The Vineyard:

“Let me sing for my beloved
my love-song concerning his vineyard:
My beloved had a vineyard
on a very fertile hill.
He dug it and cleared it of stones,
and planted it with choice vines;
he built a watchtower in the midst of it,
and hewed out a wine vat in it;

he expected it to yield grapes,
but it yielded wild grapes.
And now, inhabitants of Jerusalem
and people of Judah,
judge between me
and my vineyard.”

As we learn from our lessons today, long ago, God sung us a love song about a vineyard that he has given into our care. He longs to see the fruit of justice flourishing within. Instead, we have our own agendas. We don't want to be held accountable for being good stewards of it. As we look around us today, we have to face this “failure of stewardship.” Public conversation and public trust is clogged with wild grapes. Suddenly there is violence instead of justice. We are not taking care of what God has given us to take care of - each other and our planet.

Paul is singing the same song in prison, in Rome, waiting for his day in court. But this time, the song awakens hearts who are more willing to learn how the music. He sends a love letter to his favorite church. He will send this letter at the hands of Epaphroditus. He will thank them for sending Epaphroditus to him, and through his service, sacrificing everything to look after him, to assure his safety and comfort. Most importantly, he will let them know that Epaphroditus is alright, and that after having fallen ill, almost dying far away in Rome, Paul is sending him back, with this song, with encouragement and guidance.

And so today, we get to listen to Paul's song, his tender advice to a people who know what hangs in the balance. Paul asks them to think of him in prison, and rejoice. Yes, be thankful, that as followers of Christ, nothing can really deter us from the works of love we have to do. Nothing can be taken from us, nothing that we give up, will deter us from knowing the one who made us for a purpose and will remake us in his image. Not even the loss of our status in society, the loss of our health, not even a sickness unto death.

I suppose the only loss that is unrepairable in God's word to us today is the loss of this song, the loss of the love of the Church in Philippi, the loss of the feeling we have that Christ is in us, that we are suffering for good, dying to self, and rising with him.

I pray simply that each one of us who looks to Christ, who follows Christ, may discover that the world cannot take away from us. Beloved, fall in love again with the Author of your story. Listen, when you pray, for the voice that responds in love. When you are alone, attend to the Presence that draws near. When you suffer, when you have to surrender, recognize Jesus' hand supporting you, his arms holding you up, his feet bringing you to a place of safety. Reach for that surpassing knowledge of knowing Jesus Christ as Lord. Look for that pattern of salvation that is the power of the resurrection and goal of the upward call in Christ, the desire to become like him in any way.

Some news changes everything. Paul writes this to us, whom he loves so dearly. This is possibly the most personal thing he ever wrote:

If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.

Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.