



10/04/2020 Gardening the People
Isaiah 5:1-7; Psalm 80:7-15; Philippians 3:4b-14; Matthew 21:33-46
Reverend Giuseppe Mattei

I enjoy working in my backyard. During my last vacation, besides working on a puzzle, Stephanie and I bought some new flower plants, dug holes, lined them with fresh rich soils, planted the plants and watered them. We don't mind putting up with the vine roots that need to be cleared and the occasional mosquito bite. We stay out at work as long as we can bear the heat of the day and the backpain. The hardest part is to endure the horse flies and the vines that give me skin rash and at times swelling on my legs and arms. We get a deep pleasure at taking in the variety of different colors, sizes, and foliage and we certainly enjoy sipping our coffee in our back porch in the morning.

I would not want to do that as a job, though. That job requires a lot of hard, dirty, sweaty, mosquito-bitten work. I admire the endurance, love and patience of farmworkers, week after week, year after long year. I can't help but noticing the large majority of them are Brown people, most probably immigrants. Have they all got their working permit? Have they got health coverage? Decent housing? Running water? A living wage? Community acceptance? Protection from harassment? I don't think so and I can't help thinking about that when I go grocery shopping or thanking God for the food on my table. I remember to thank God for the brown hands that make sure I have fresh vegetables and fruit to eat.

Old Testament professor, Mark Hamilton, reminds us that in the Bible, "the stranger appears as a guest to be welcomed, not a problem to be solved."

In fact, in the book of Deuteronomy there are 21 references to the stranger in the midst of the people of Israel, and in Exodus 23:9, God remarks "you shall not oppress a *stranger* because you know the stranger's life since you were *strangers* in Egypt's land." In a way, God is appealing to the people's memory of their own hardship and how God had intervened on their behalf.

Their new status in the Promised Land is not the fruit of their own work (although they had to cross the desert, the Red Sea, and the River Jordan.) It is not thanks to their own merit that they are now better off than the immigrants. Yet, the immigrants are legally protected in Israel should Israel bother to follow the ways of the Lord. "Israelites should avoid abusing the *stranger* not primarily out of fear of divine punishment, but because of empathy for the migrant's vulnerability."¹ When the people of Israel violate the vulnerable, they would be espousing the evil ways of the Egyptians and their leader would be no different than corrupt Pharaoh.

¹ <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/critical-essay/immigration-and-biblical-law-stranger>



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In today's Scriptures, the whole of Israel and not just a few individuals is accused of unfaithfulness. It is the whole people that is indicted for not recognizing the grace God has showered on them since the liberation from Egyptian captivity. In Isaiah's love song, Israel is compared to a promising vineyard into which God has put God's sweat and hope. Despite God's loving care, the vineyard has brought forth "wild grapes" of injustice and distress. The failure to honor justice and deliver fruits of righteousness has broken the divine heart. God is angered at the loss of what could have been God's true love.

Thus, God appeals to the people's judgment: Do they think they have treated God fairly? God has worked in expectation of a long-term relationship, building a watchtower and a wine vat, both of which would serve over time. All the work produces nothing but wild fruit that would have grown without labor. God is hugely disappointed: the people of Israel do not live responsibly nor righteously. The passage describes the "wild grapes" as injustice and violence. In the prophetic literature of the Bible, justice refers to basic fairness within society. It demands economic and legal fairness. All people should have the same legal protection and enough to live on.

But not all judges are impartial and not all people are food secure.

All God's work goes to waste and God feels understandably angry. The relationship with the vineyard is abandoned in sheer bitterness. God's withdrawal is a sad commentary on the state of the affair: there is no corresponding love from the chosen people. When there is no justice, the people cannot claim to love God. Faith demands righteous relationships. But while there are those who live indulgent lives, others do not have enough to survive. Those who claim to be God's people cannot ignore those who go hungry or are barely tolerated in the community. God, the Bible teaches us, has heard the cry of the poor, those who suffer injustices and have been victimized by violence. God feels disappointed, sad, and angry because God cares about those who have been cheated and lied to by the powerful. The wild grapes are the injustices that have oppressed the poor and silenced the marginalized.

Psalm 80 picks up the theme of the vineyard from the people's perspective. God may feel absent and far away, but the psalmist trusts the faithfulness of Yahweh and gives voice to a lament on behalf of those who have no one to turn to. It would be enough, the psalmist suggests, for our Almighty God to shine God's face on the people for the people to feel safe.

How can God reject God's own work after all? How can God be missing in action? It feels that way, doesn't it, when we look at all that is going on in the world? Is God going to abandon God's creation to the environmental crisis, to fires and drought, floods and hurricanes? Does God not see the horror of violence, the tragedy of a world pandemic, the brutality of racist



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policies, the moral collapse, the cruelty of indifference, the desperation of the unemployed, and the revulsion of sex trafficking?

At the present, God is silent, invisible, and potentially impotent. Too many hardships, too much anxiety, too many worries can tip the scales to cause people to wonder about the vitality and presence of God. How many people amid the tragedies of life have been pushed to ask: “Is this all there is—one bad thing after another—and is God nowhere to be found?”

Yet, the Psalmist invites reflection about the action of God as one who works as a vineyard farmer transplanting and nurturing vines to produce good fruit. The disorientation produced by the silence and absence of God affirms the need of having God’s face shine on the people. It also begs the question: “How come?”

Indeed, how come God’s face is not shining on us?

- How far have we removed ourselves from the ways of the Lord?
- How could our relationship with God be repaired?
- Could the restoration of justice and the restitution of dignity to those who have been wronged help in bringing about a more just society?

In his letter to the Philippians, Paul laughs at meritocracy. Our attempts at creating a neat and orderly system that ultimately speaks well of ourselves and sings the glories of our accomplishments fall into the realm of the ridiculous. For some reasons, the grass is always greener on the other side of the fence and people get locked in a competitive race to outdo one another. All that is rubbish and it’s best to regard it as a loss, Paul affirms.

How would really knowing Christ and the power of his resurrection change the way we relate to one another and the rest of the world creatures? Would there be systemic exploitation and abuse or would the concept of us being siblings and children of the same Father make a difference in our society? Would we seek the “righteousness of the law” or would we allow the faith of Christ to motivate us to advance justice, freedom, and respect for all people?

Jesus suffered to death because he loved much associating himself with the rejects of society. Would we follow him in the kind of love that lifts up the lowly who have heard time and again that they should be content with the benevolence of those in power? What’s wrong with Black people? What’s wrong with Brown, Native American, Asian, gay and transgender: haven’t they got enough benefits, yet? Shouldn’t they be grateful for the legal and social progress made so far? Can’t they be happy and cooperative for a change?



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In Paul's mind, the privilege of belonging to the right group creates the illusion of respectability and well-being at the expense of one's own humanity. It is a false satisfaction that inebriates the ego and insulates one from the deep sufferings of others.

Might his rejection of meritocracy be regarded as his preference for the stone of the gospel that trips the arrogant and crashes the abuser, the cornerstone that builds people up into new creatures in Christ? Is this what Paul is after? Could life in Christ shatter any exclusivist barrier, strengthen one in compassion, and encourage people on the way of justice?

The Bible is clear: God is the Lord of the harvest. May we be found with fruits of the kingdom.
Amen.