

October 5, 2008

Proper 22, Year A

Texts: Isaiah 5:1-7

Psalm 80:7-14

Philippians 3:4b-14

Matthew 21:33-46

Sermon by the Rev'd A. Robert Hirschfeld, Rector

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“Let me sing a song for my beloved, my love-song concerning his vineyard.”

The love song. Given what's happened in the world, and in the country, and in our town of Amherst this week, it seems utter folly to talk about love songs. What could possibly be more frivolous than to speak of love songs at a time like this? The Taliban is resurgent, Pakistan in chaos, global markets following our lead in a nose dive. The nation seems feels more rent in half between two presidential tickets. And it seems very divided about the wisdom of buying a lot of bad debt to rescue a teetering economy.

But this morning, I think all of that pales in comparison to the news that jarred us in Amherst earlier this week that simply cannot go unacknowledged. More gut wrenching and agonizing than any thing that's happening out there, came the cry of a mother on the corner of Summer and Montague on Tuesday morning. Can we just have a moment of silence for the soul of Abraham Espinoza who was tragically taken from us, the result of a bus accident. And let us pray for his family.

Accept into the arms of your mercy and love, we humbly ask you almighty, ever living, Father, the soul of little Abraham. May his journey and his growth continue now in your eternal home, may he go from strength to strength and from glory to glory around your table and in the presence of your own son who came to destroy death and give us life. We pray this in the name of Jesus, who welcomed all children as children of the one God.

So a love song. There is a radio host in the evening who takes calls from people from all walks of life. They tell her their troubles, how a spouse or boyfriend is about to be shipped off to Iraq or Afghanistan and they are about to have a child, or about a whether to take a man back after his infidelity, or about how much he loves his wife of 10 years and is in awe of her ability to work and raise the children. And the radio host prides herself on being able to pick the perfect love song for the particular situation. It's completely sappy, sentimental, syrupy and even sick, but I have to admit, after a long Vestry meeting, or a day at the Church, there is something soothing, predictable, even liturgical about this radio show. God help me.

Isaiah is like that radio host, I think her name is Delilah. For Isaiah wants to play a love song that God wants to sing to his beloved, the people of Judah.

Let me sing a song 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;

Everything is good and beautiful, full of the hope of an abundant harvest, like the promise of being close to a loved one, and the way the metaphor works, the promise of an abundant harvest is the same as the promise of being alone with one's beloved. Israelite poetry is infused with this idea...when the bible speaks of vineyards and vines and grapes and wine, the bible isn't talking about farming, it's talking about love, passionate, warm, love. This is from the Song of Solomon:

"My beloved is to me a cluster of henna blossoms in the vineyard of En-gedi"....and later... this excerpt, the only one appropriate for the 8am service: "Your belly is like a heap of wheat encircled with lilies."

Love songs. Even if we don't feel in love, they can lift us, move us, pull us out of the pain and anguish of the world into a world where we can imagine, or remember, that we are loved, and the love is still possible.

But then, quickly, unexpectedly the Isaiah's love song of the beloved and his vineyard moves from a love song, to an oracle of judgment, grief, and anger.

The vineyard owner expected his planting to yield grapes, but instead it yielded wild grapes. And suddenly the love song, the promise of a scene of love, prosperity, and pleasure, becomes a scene of destruction. The vineyard owner, whom we take to be God, decides that the vineyard is not worth saving, but the hedge that surrounds it should be devoured by wild animals, the walls that protect it should be trampled down, and the garden overcome with weeds and brambles. No rain falling on it, it shall become a dry, barren, fruitless place. Instead of a lush garden with the scent and colors of the abundant life, we are thrown into the scene of Samuel Beckett's, *Waiting for Godot*. Boulders. A leafless and dead tree.

Why the change? Why the sudden turn from the powerful promise of abundance and joy to the devastation of a vineyard being abandoned and torn down? Because, according to the poem, because the love is unrequited. The love between God and God's beloved is not returned, but is trampled on. Love songs rhyme, and this one rhymes, too. The lover wants the beloved to provide mishpat (justice) and instead got mispach (bloodshed); the lover expected to yield tsedeqah, (righteousness) and instead received tse' aqah, (the cry of the oppressed). The prophet Isaiah uses the similarity of sound, a kind of rhyme or pun, to drive home his point.

Here we are in the world, a global vineyard of tremendous promise, of unimaginable resources, a place where it would be so easy to accept the abundance of God, and where are we? Speaking of wild grapes: In 2007, the average C.E.O. of a Standard & Poor's 500 company received \$14.2 million in total compensation. Five hundred people, fewer than the mailing list of Grace Church Parish made a total of more than \$7 billion.

At the same time 1.1 billion people in this world had consumption levels less than \$1 per day – what the World Bank describes as “extreme poverty.” And a total of 2.7 billion live on less than \$2 a day. That's about 40 per cent of the world's population.

How can we sing a new song, how can we sing a love song, how would God sing a love song, when it's so clear that we, the human race, this nation, even this church, might not be singing it back to God?

Where is the love? Love songs that mourn the loss of love are called laments: “Where is the love?” That was a song some years ago that would, like Isaiah's, be called a lament.

Imagine God as lover. Imagine a God who just wants to shower the abundance of God's life, and even a material life, on each one of us and all humanity. That's what God desires...to allow all humankind to know abundance, fullness. Christianity is actually, as Archbishop William Temple said, the most materialistic of religions. It's materialistic in part because we believe that God wants us all to have shelter, food, clean water, friendship, fun, meaningful and purposeful work for the healthy stewardship of our vineyards. What is your vineyard? Your family, your close friendships, your church, your neighborhood, community, school, team? What is your vineyard, and is it really yours? Aren't we really tenants in a planting, a pasture, a garden, that God, the creator and lover created for us to relish and care for?

And yet, what are we making of that vineyard? In many ways it feels that the Vineyard owner has been sending some of his servants to our nation and even our church to see if we've forgotten whose garden we're in. Are our lives love songs, or are they just a lot of busy noise? Is our Church singing a love song, or is it just shouting angry epithets, hitting each other with a lot of shoulds and oughts.

But the gospel, ultimately, is not about shoulds or musts or oughts, I don't think. The word we often use is guilt trip. We ought to give more, you should give more, you must serve here, or get on that committee. I don't know about you, but when I hear that, I get sad, to see a love song turn into a guilt trip. But what if God is up to something real, and powerful, and mysteriously redemptive in the midst of our current pains and anxieties? What if we were to encourage each other to see in our striving for peace, justice, economic fairness, our giving to the church and charity, in our pursuit of the Millennium Development Goals, in our working for educational equality among the poor among us, even in Holyoke or Springfield, what if all that work was how we sing a love song. A Love Song.

Now more than ever, we need some love songs. Yep. I know it's probably completely sappy, frivolous. But I think God is calling us in these difficult, uncertain, fractious time. We will need to work, but if we don't see our work as God's love song, singing in us, singing within us, well, then we people of the Good News would be of all people, the most to be pitied.

What if he's actually calling out to us, singing a new love song. What if he's singing to us like the Rev. Al Green sang to us in that old song, "Let's stay together."

I, I'm so in love with you  
Whatever you want to do  
Is all right with me  
'Cause you make me feel so brand new  
And I want to spend my life with you

Since, since we've been together  
Loving you forever  
Is what I need  
Let me be the one you come running to  
I'll never be untrue

Let's, let's stay together  
Lovin' you whether, whether  
Times are good or bad, happy or sad

Whether times are good or bad, happy or sad

Why, why some people break up  
Then turn around and make up  
I just can't see  
You'd never do that to me (would you, baby)  
Staying around you is all I see  
(Here's what I want us to do)

[Repeat to fade:]

Let's, we oughta stay together  
Loving you whether, whether  
Times are good or bad, happy or sad