

## **“Pleasant Plantings and Cleft Clumps”**

Rev. Ken McGarry at The First Congregational Church in Stoneham, Massachusetts  
August 14, 2022 – Tenth Sunday after Pentecost  
Isaiah 5:1-7; Luke 12:49-56

It's very good to be enjoying together with you some much cooler temperatures than those we experienced last week. The cooler weather is certainly good for us, and it's also good for our lawns, which I personally appreciate greatly as growing turf grass is one of my hobbies (one of you would probably say it's less of a healthy hobby and a bit more of an unhealthy obsession). Later today, I'm planning on working on my hobby/obsession by planting grass seed, for which I've been getting ready all spring and summer, including much of my recent vacation time. On our lawn at our home in Reading, we already have growing plenty of good, desirable grasses, such as Kentucky bluegrass, annual ryegrass, and a variety of fun fescues, but we've also had growing a whole lot of unwanted, ugly weeds and grasses. My nemesis since moving to Reading a few years ago has been creeping bentgrass, which is lovely when perfectly manicured on golf greens, but looks terrible on home lawns, where it is a nasty weed that spreads out and forms a thick mat over the good grasses, slowly overwhelming them and choking them out. So to get rid of the weeds, this spring, I sprayed on some stuff made from a kind of myrtle bush that kills the bentgrass and other bad guys while not harming the good guys at all. Sure enough, it slowly killed off the bentgrass over the course of the summer, leaving a thick mat of dead roots and runners. In order to open up the soil to receive seeds of the kinds of grasses I want to grow, I had to pull up all of the nasty old bentgrass, which left us with a yard full of clumps of good grasses with expanses of dirt between them. Today, I will be putting down new grass seed and begin the work of raising baby grass, which, hopefully, will give us a less embarrassing front yard in a couple of months. Well, that's the plan anyway!

Are any of you fellow grass growers? Gardeners? Farmers? Vine-growers? Perhaps then, you join me in relating at least a bit to our first reading from Isaiah, which includes a parable of a grower of things. In the parable, a vine-grower plants choice grape vines. The grower gave the vines every advantage, planting them on a very fertile hill, cleared of stones and protected by a hedge and wall, and expected them to produce good fruit that would be made into choice wine.

But even though the vineyard is lovingly planted and given every advantage by the grower to become a “pleasant planting,” its vines inexplicably do not produce good wine-making grapes; rather, they produce bitter and unusable wild grapes.

Isaiah goes on to tell us that the grower is God and the vines are Israel and Judah, which is a common motif that is repeated throughout the Hebrew scriptures. In this passage, God the grower, who expected good fruit to come from the lovingly planted vineyard of Israel and Judah, found in them instead the bad fruit. Isaiah writes that God “expected justice, but saw bloodshed; righteousness, but heard a cry,” (Isaiah 5:7). Judah and Israel were to be a pleasant planting in which justice and righteousness grew and flourished and produced peace, but they became instead a place full of violence and sorrow. So God the grower would remove the barriers protecting Israel and Judah to let them be ruined and conquered by their warring neighbors, and indeed they were.

The prophet Isaiah does not give us a feel-good story this morning; nor does the prophet Jesus in our gospel reading, in which he states that *from* him will come division, with households being torn apart. This passage is a little shocking to our ears -- which is the point -- in this gospel which begins by telling us that the Christ will “guide our feet into the way of peace” (Luke 1:79) and ends with the resurrected Jesus breathing out a benediction of peace upon his followers (24:36). The stunning point of Jesus is that his work of peace-making will not only bring peace, but on the way, it will bring division, even between those bound together as kin. For Jesus worked to push the people to become the righteous and just vineyard that God intended them to be, and pushing for justice and righteousness brings discord and division. Jesus knew this well as his work of calling the people and their religious and political leaders to become more just and righteous caused division within his own family, who, the gospels tell us, rejected his ministry, thinking that he had lost his mind. It was his work of pushing for the growth of justice and righteousness among the people that ultimately led their leaders to kill him.

We, as followers of Jesus, are also called to continue his work of calling for the growth of the good fruits of justice and righteousness in whatever gardens we find ourselves planted. While I hope that our work does not lead us to experience the violence that Jesus did, we can be assured that it will not be embraced by all

with open arms as disrupting the status quo threatens the power and wealth of people who will do anything -- including resorting to all kinds of violent behavior - - to maintain and grow their power and wealth.

Unfortunately, greed for power and wealth, and not a desire to grow justice and righteousness, is a hallmark of many of our churches here in our American garden. Too many of our congregations make idols of wealth and power, worshipping these above all else and claiming that they are sure signs of being blessed by God. They are not, and we should not let the creeping weed of lust for wealth and power grow in our own midst. While all people are welcome here, not all behaviors are welcome here, and it is good for us to reject and pull up the weedy behavior of greed that grows around us. And if we see parts of our own growth as a clump of God's pleasant planting diseased by the behavior of greed, or any other behavior that hinders our mission to enact justice, we should cleave that off. I believe that God would much rather have a yard full of cleft-but-healthy clumps than intact-but-diseased ones.

May we be and become more of a healthy clump in God's pleasant planting. May we continue and grow our work of enacting justice by caring for the hungry and raising up loving little ones. May our work to make true peace bless the world and bless us. Amen.