

Week 2

Isaiah 5:1-7 "How to Get a Life."

Begin with prayer:

Dear God,
Thank you for this time to gather together in community and for the opportunity to study and discuss scripture,
Lord, we often struggle with your mercy and your grace, it is beyond our understanding.
We ask that you will help us to know and accept your mercy more and more each day.
And in knowing and accepting it, may it overflow in us, that we may share it with others.
In Jesus name we pray,
Amen.

Read the text for today. (Suggestion: Go around and read it out loud, each person taking a verse.)
Ask: What stood out to you about this text? What, if anything, doesn't make sense? What caught your attention and sparked curiosity?

Isaiah 5 begins with what looks like a light-hearted romantic ballad. A gardener opens this chapter by saying, "Listen up! I'm going to sing you a heartfelt song about my loved one—a song about the vineyard of our love!" What looks like a love song, quickly changes into lament. The singer worked hard to create the right conditions for his vineyard, for what is later called "a garden of delight." He did everything right. He planted expensive vines hoping to produce a variety of fine wines. As far as he knew, everything was on track. The grapes grew and looked like the real deal. The vines seemed to flourish. When the harvest finally came, the only grapes he could find were sour, stinky, and worthless.

Through the clever use of words in this passage, Isaiah makes clear that God regarded the Israelites as a bunch of stinkers. In verse 7 Isaiah said that the good, juicy grapes God wanted were justice and righteousness. Instead what God discovered in the people of Israel was the exact opposite. Instead of justice he found bloodshed, instead of righteousness he found the cries of the oppressed. The word-play here in Hebrew is that the difference between "justice" and "bloodshed" and between "righteousness" and "cries" is just one letter each. These words are so similar to each other that you have to read carefully and look closely to see the difference. God looked for:

mishpat (justice) but discovered instead
mishpah (bloodshed); he looked for
zedekah (righteousness) but found instead
azekah (cries).

Puns, of course, are often used for humor; but there's nothing funny about the pun in verse 7. Isaiah used it to convey that when it comes to justice and righteousness, close is not good enough. It didn't matter that from a distance the grapes on Israel's vine looked like the grapes God wanted. It was the closer inspection that counted.

Israel had a form of justice, but it was justice for the few, the wealthy, the "winners" of society. Most of what the upper crust had was built upon the backs of the poor. Some of the wealthy people looked very righteous, very pious – they went to the Temple, observed the Sabbath, and prayed fairly regularly. Yet their ears were deaf to the cries of the poor. Cries that God's ears picked out easily. Instead of being the center of justice, the Temple became a shelter for the elite. The Temple walls were used to keep the wealthy from hearing the cries of those in need.

Today we tend to restrict justice to matters of the legal system. Today "judges" are people in black robes who get involved only after laws are broken. But biblical "judges" (from the book of the same name) were not people who delivered verdicts from a bench, they were champions of justice who went out and pursued the righteous things of God. As Christians, this is our calling as well! But what does that mean for us? How are we to recognize and carry out God's love of justice and righteousness? It's a challenging question that needs to be wrestled with. It's difficult to deny that God's desire for justice has economic and human rights implications.

"I am the true vine, you are the branches," Jesus famously said. Why didn't Jesus simply say "I am the vine"? Why did he nuance it as the "true vine"? Some believe it's because Jesus was harking back to Old Testament passages like Isaiah 5. Israel should have been God's true vineyard, but she wasn't. In the long run, only stinky, sour grapes were produced from Israel's vines. But Jesus is the true vine. In him--at last--was the kind of fruit God had wanted to bear all along.

We are the branches of that vine! So although our situation may be different from that of ancient Israel's, many of the ideas about justice they faced, need to be concerns of Christians today.

Let's talk about it:

- What could it look like if our justice was more preventative in care for widows, orphans, and people that could be labeled as "outsiders"?
- What is one righteous thing of God that you have felt called to pursue? What motivates you to do it? What prevents you?
- God doesn't seem to be happy with 'close enough' when it comes to justice issues. How can we make justice better in this place? Start with small, manageable things that you can do in your dorm, on this campus, or in your workplace. It might help to bring up specific instances of injustice that you can remember, and talk about how you might act differently next time.
- Read John 15:1-17. God doesn't simply want people that are less sour or foul to the taste – God wants people that are grafted into the true vine. To get the best yield out of their plants, gardeners often prune and cutting back the old, dead stuff, so that the plant can have new growth and better flourish. Being a model of the true vine is going to take some life-pruning – what things need to be pruned in your life in order for you to look more like Christ (the true vine)?
- Being grafted into the vine means that we don't have to accomplish it on our own. We have one who is the true vine, growing rightly when all we can do is grow crooked. How do you "abide" in Jesus, your vine?