

The Beloved Vineyard

Isaiah 5:1-7
Hebrews 12:1,2

In II Samuel we read of the prophet Nathan telling King David a little parable about a man who slept with another man's wife, then had her husband killed in battle. When David exclaims that man was horrible, Nathan says, “**You are** that man!” And so David was. Nathan's parable referenced the Bathsheeba incident. Here the prophet Isaiah provides a similar setup. He starts out sweetly enough. “Let me sing for my beloved a love song concerning his vineyard.” This beloved takes great pains to plant and protect a vineyard. But it yields wild, worthless grapes. At this point Isaiah twists the knife. While not yet openly stating that the character building the vineyard stands for the Lord God, his telling of this parable gradually makes it plain—and equally plain that the vineyard stands for the people of Judah. At the end, Isaiah finally comes right out and says it: “For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the people of Judah are his pleasant planting; and he looked for justice, but behold, (he saw) bloodshed; for righteousness, but behold (he heard) a cry!”

The Lord has made covenant with the people of Judah. Their covenant obligations include—quite prominently—that they do justice and act righteously. They have failed for generations by the time Isaiah delivered this parable. It predicts they will now pay as their northern cousins in the formed kingdom of Israel have already

paid: by losing their land, their freedom, and for many, their lives. Every covenant blessing will disappear. A foreign army, portended in other visions of Isaiah, will flatten them. Isaiah asks his people to judge themselves. Who has behaved justly and righteously, the Lord God or themselves? They can condemn only themselves.

The notes in my Oxford Study Bible define justice and righteousness with admirable simplicity. I quote: "*Justice* is the faithful application of God's will to daily living. *Righteousness* is the living, dynamic relationship between humanity and God in which humanity behaves in a way that is spiritually and morally acceptable to God." The Lord God wants the people of God to apply God's will to real life. The Lord God wants the people of God to behave with moral and spiritual maturity. These expectations of God apply just as surely to us today as they did to the people of Judah some 207 centuries ago. How might **we** do justice and act righteously?

I have learned more of one Afghani's story. In keeping with the policies of both our local Operation HEART group and our national partner Church World Service, I do not ask personal questions of our guests. As they come to know us, however, they begin to tell us things. This man, we'll call him Shahmeer, still lives in Afghanistan. He personally assisted in the airborne evacuation of thousands of his fellow Afghanis a year ago. Crewing on those massive C-17 cargo aircraft, he tied people down with ropes and straps around their waists and through the perforations on the deck. During the flights he brought them bottled water and snacks. About two weeks after the Taliban reasserted control he paid \$20,000 to a truck driver friend to smuggle his wife

and children across Iran, Iraq and Saudi Arabia to the refugee camps set up in the United Arab Emirates. The trip covered more than six hundred miles and took parts of three days (not the six I told some of you last Sunday). Shahmeer's family lived in the camps for nine months. They have lived here in Terre Haute since mid-June.

As in all Muslim countries, Afghanis greet one another by saying “Salaam”, an Arabic word meaning “peace” or “peace be upon you”. I greet our Afghani guests with salaam. Occasionally Shahmeer's wife will reply in her native Dari language with words that translate as, “May Allah's blessing be upon you.” Not one of our guests is a Christian. Why does Church World Service, a Christian organization, and Operation HEART, a mostly Christian organization, go to such trouble and expense to settle Muslims in America? For my part the answer is that it is just and righteous. For one thing, those who fled helped our military and contractors. They took a calculated risk that we would stay in-country and protect them in return for their translating, guiding and other services. When we left we left them in mortal danger. We **owe** them the chance to come and live among us. It is only right. Or righteous, which again reflects our moral and spiritual maturity in relationship with our God, whom we name Jesus.

For another thing, all God's people got a place in the choir. Christian, Muslim, Jew, agnostic or atheist, **all** God's children belong to God. That is to say God loves us all. God has told us in the Apostle Paul's New Testament letters, which frequently state that, since Christ's appearance, there is no longer slave nor free, male nor female, Jew or Greek. By extrapolation we can add that since Christ has come—and

made some rather pointed statements about inclusion—there is no longer any difference in God's eyes between any persons, no matter what we think may separate us. We can get into theological discussions about who gets saved and how. Must you be a Christian? These discussions have value. They are necessary. This is not one of those discussions. We speak now about including all humanity in the community of humanity. It is only just. Clearly, God wills it.

Last Sunday we read the familiar words opening Hebrews chapter eleven that define faith as the proof of things hoped for, the guarantee of things unseen. Today we read the opening of chapter twelve, which begins with the word “therefore”. That therefore builds on the whole of the preceding chapter, in which the author uses numerous Old Testament examples of faith. The point is that faith empowers the people of God to **be** the people of God. It gives us the ability to do justice and act righteously. And Hebrews uses the word perseverance. This implies we run not a sprint but a marathon. My high school track coach taught the sprinters not to worry about breathing during their races. “Just get down the danged lane,” he said. To the long distance runners he said, “Find your pattern. Develop a rhythm of breathing that works for you.” We need to develop a rhythm that works for us. Once we develop, or realize we already have, faith, we need to draw on its resources like the oxygen that empowers a distance runner to keep going. Because justice and righteousness can be exhausting.

Direct delivery of services to disadvantaged people like Operation HEART for

our Afghanis, or Manna from Seven for Terre Haute's discouragingly numerous impoverished children of God, depend on long-distance runners. They require people who can draw on resources that keep them going. Isaiah and the author of Hebrews call upon us to live as people that keep on going. I have long thought that the lists of spiritual gifts we find in the New Testament lack one critical and specific gift: the spiritual gift of showing up. Ministry happens only when people show up to do it. Whether greeting or ushering for our worship services, delivering food from Manna from Seven to Afghanis (a weekly occurrence), or lobbying elected officials for just and righteous decisions, nothing happens until faithful people running their own spiritual marathons show up.

How strong is your faith in the risen Jesus Christ? Does your faith empower you to show up, to keep going, to incarnate the love of God? Please do not misunderstand: nobody can have a good run every day. Linda and I have a friend whose daily running log documents that across the course of his life he has run around the earth at the Equator. Twice. More than 48,000 miles. One of his favorite sayings about running is, "Sometimes you feel like a nut, sometimes you don't." Sometimes we believe in Jesus with the confidence that pushes us to minister in his name. Sometimes we don't. But through prayer, and support from our brothers and sisters in the church, we can get up the next day, square our shoulders, and keep running. Do what you need to do to find the spiritual energy to do justice and to act righteously. God calls us to this. God has provided us the resources to do it. Believe and show up.