

Wild Grapes-Lisa McLennan
Isaiah 5:1-7

Prayer: Lord our God, we bless and thank you for the gift of your word. Grant me both the humility and boldness necessary to preach it. Prepare our hearts and lives to be strengthened and changed by it. Through Christ our Lord, Amen.

I don't know about you. But I'm a sucker for a good love song. My first real recollection of having a sweetie and a really feeling the emotion of a love song was in 1983. I was in about the 10th grade and the song was Total Eclipse of the Heart, by Bonnie Tyler. If you know this song, I may have just lost all credibility with you. If you don't know it, consider yourself lucky. I like to think my tastes have improved a bit. I finally discovered the rhythm and blues and for years my favorite love song has been Let's Stay Together, by Al Green. Now that's a good song.

In preparation for today, I looked at the top 100 love songs of all time. I don't know that I totally agree with the entire list, but Let's Stay Together was number 45. Total Eclipse of the Heart...nowhere on the list. One thing I noticed about these songs was that they fell into one of two categories:

They were either a hopelessly in love songs like-
My Girl (Temptations),
3 Times a Lady (Commodores),
You are the Sunshine of my Life (Stevie Wonder),
At Last-by the recently departed Etta James or
Unchained Melody (Righteous Brothers).

I call these 'smitten' songs.

The other type of songs was what I like to call 'love gone wrong' songs.

You know these too...
Whitney and Dolly both sang 'I Will Always Love You',
With or Without You (U2),
Always on My Mind (Willie Nelson)

There were lots of these kinds in the country music genre.

Adele just swept the Grammy Awards with several love gone wrong songs, but the best known was Rolling in the Deep. Bruno Mars is a current pop singer and I mean to tell you, he is miserable. He only sings about how miserable his love life is.

Our scripture reading today from Isaiah is a famous passage known as the Vineyard Love Song. It's a song describing the love between God and his people. The Vineyard Love Song tells of the loving care that God gave to the vineyard..."My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. He dug it and cleared it of stones; he built a watchtower in the midst of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it." God lovingly tended to the preparation of the soil, dug and planted exactly the vines of his choosing, he built a watchtower to protect it and a vat to store its fruit. He did everything there was to do and gave it everything it needed. Then the love song takes a twist..."He expected it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes." Uh-oh! It's a love gone wrong song. God planted grapes and he got wild grapes.

Have you ever bitten into a peach expecting it to be soft and sweet, filled with that delicious succulent flavor and for juice to begin dripping down your chin only to find it firm, tasteless and dry? Not what you expected.

We have a dog, it's a yellow lab. Hank is a terrific dog. You may know that labs, despite their size, are really gentle and easy going dogs and are great around kids. After watching us walk and play with our yellow lab for the last 10 years, one of my friends decided she would get a puppy. She had a wonderful lab while growing up and knew they were great dogs. So she found a reputable breeder and counted the weeks until they could bring home their precious 7 week old black lab puppy. They were so happy ...for about a week. This dog was obsessed with eating rocks. It wasn't interested in people. It growled and snapped at her kids. It obsessively searched for rocks and lunged at people when they tried to stop her. My friend hired a dog trainer to teach her how to work with her puppy. They spent months working with the trainer. She diligently worked with the dog. She was never able to trust it around her children and frequently found she had to keep the dog in her kennel while she cooked dinner or worked on homework with the kids. She was never able to trust the dog around her kids off the leash. After several consultations with her veterinarian and dog trainer, she was advised that this animal appeared to be a danger to children, and that her behavior was not normal. This was not what she expected in a Labrador retriever. Sadly, after 9 months she found the puppy another home where there were no children. She expected a gentle and people loving dog. Her lab was not what she expected.

This sermon was not what I expected. Caldwell feels like a bunch of wild grapes in a good way. We're not some stuffy, dry purebred Chardonnay grape. But we're not the grapes in the love song. We're the vine. And the wild grapes are the fruit we produce, the thoughts and actions of our lives.

How many of you have ever tasted the grapes at the grocery store before you buy them? I might occasionally sneak one off the bunch before spending my hard earned money. I want to make sure that they are juicy and sweet. No one really likes sour grapes do they? That's what wild grapes are...sour, hard to get down, inedible. Sort of like a wild crabapple compared to a golden delicious.

God expected his vine to produce good grapes, he got wild grapes.
God expected justice and righteousness from his people, he got bloodshed and cries.
God still expects justice and righteousness.
God still gets bloodshed and cries. We are still a vine that produces wild grapes.

I haven't really been around Caldwell long enough to see all the warts. I'm still singing smitten songs. I don't really like a love gone wrong song at Caldwell. I wasn't exactly thrilled to be assigned this scripture passage for preaching here. But God's word has something for us. Each week, we begin our worship service by confessing our sin before God and one another. I sometimes think of myself, and the church as a good pretty vine. Maybe you have too. But were not just confessing individual sins, we are confessing **Our** sin as a congregation and as part of the body of Christ and the people of God. One time someone at church shared with me that they skip parts of the prayer of confession because 'they don't do those things'.

Maybe we can avoid doing some things that are considered wrong, and maybe we do some good things. But even the good things we do are tainted by the fact that we feel good about what we have done. Sometimes we even do good things just to make us feel good. The good we do is tainted by how proud we are of it. The reality is...we are a vine that produces wild fruit. Wild grapes is our basic nature.

The church is fractured, disjointed and broken. Many of us can't even speak to one another about what divides us. We can be self righteous, we don't always love our enemy or our brothers and sisters, we look down on those who disagree with us, we judge others, we idolize people and things, we are prideful, lazy, wasteful, greedy, and we as people and a church are consumed with ourselves. It's not about us. It's about God and his desire for justice and righteousness for all his children.

Before you run me out of here, I do have some good news.
God doesn't rip up the vine and start over.
God hasn't quit on us.
God hasn't thrown away the peach.
God hasn't gotten rid of the dog.
God hasn't quit on us.

God may have allowed the vineyard to endure some consequences; the vineyard has weathered some storms and stampedes. At times it may even seem as if God has stepped back and abandoned the vineyard. But he never did. And He never will. God doesn't quit on us. But there's more.

Not only does he keep the vine, but every now and then, thanks be to God, there's evidence of good grapes in our midst. By the power of the Holy Spirit, every now and then we get a glimpse of the Kingdom where all the grapes will be good, and where wild grapes will be a thing of the past. Every now and then, God's Holy Spirit produces a good grape amidst the wild grapes.

The Caldwell story itself is evidence of good grapes in our midst. 5 years ago, it looked as if this vine was about to die. The vine had grown thin and sparse. The ground was dry. It looked as if the end was near. But God was near, and started tending the vine, giving it a little water and nourishment. It never gave up on the vine. The vine began to grow again, and flourish.

Last Friday morning I had the privilege to attend the Interfaith Summit on affordable housing and homelessness here in Charlotte. There were over 300 people there representing 94 different faith based groups. The day's focus was on ending and preventing homelessness in Charlotte in the next 5 years. Caldwell was one of 3 congregations highlighted for its ongoing efforts in combating homelessness. John gave a wonderful presentation on Caldwell's partnership with the Salvation Army and all the exciting things going on at Caldwell House. It sure tasted like a good grape to me.

The morning was kicked off with a congratulations and cheer for Friday's opinion editorial newspaper piece written by John. In it he challenges the Elizabeth neighborhood about its opposition to the supportive housing proposal for the empty nursing home next door. He couldn't have done that without this congregations support. Tasty grape.

In this centennial year, Caldwell is taking time to look back at where it has been. Tonight there will be a wonderful celebration to reflect and remember Caldwell Tales of the Past. But it will also be a year to reflect on where God is calling this congregation to participate in His Kingdom. It is a year to consider how this vine He has planted and tended and grown will be best used in His service, for justice and righteousness for all God's people.

This is a vineyard love song. It might be a 'love gone wrong' song on our part. But it is NOT a song about love that is gone. This is not a song about lost love. This is a song about enduring and faithful love despite how we have gone wrong.

God's love song for us continues to sing. Amazing Grace...how sweet the sound....say it with me...that saved a wretch like me.

Amen.