

“Sour Grapes”
 Isaiah 5:1-7
 Rev. David Hutchinson
 Sunday, February 10, 2019

A hungry fox tried to reach some grapes which he saw on a vine.

The vine was hanging off a branch high up in a tree.

And...it was just *too* high.

So he went away - - - and he comforted himself by saying:

“Well, those grapes weren’t ripe anyhow – they were sour!”

Anybody know what I’m talking about?

It’s a fable – because it’s true.

And it’s the origin - - of the expression “sour grapes”.

The psychological term - - for sour grapes is:

“cognitive dissonance”.

When we told two conflicting ideas simultaneously, we have

cognitive dissonance.

A dissonance - - in our way thinking.

For example:

When we are making a decision, and aspects of the rejected choice are...

...nevertheless appealing, as in, we both *like* it - - **and** *reject* it...

...then - - we have: “cognitive dissonance”

Our brains and our hearts are - - dissonant.

Frustrated.

Disappointed.

We like it - - and yet we reject it.

A woman lived in Detroit during its heyday as a car manufacturing capital. And she loved - - her General Motors car. But she watched Detroit go bankrupt.

And by and by the time came - - to purchase a new car.

And - - she bought a Hyundai.

As she signed the purchase papers she comforted herself by saying:

“Well, the Oldsmobile just isn’t what it used to be”

Do you recognize the fable?

Because it’s true...

According to Aesop, the fable is about - - failure.

And, according to **Time** magazine, a few years ago...

the situation in Detroit - - could be described as “extreme failure”.

So what do we do - - with situations of failure, in our lives?

The frustration and disappointment, can cause dissonance.

Sour grapes.

One of the questions that the scripture reading for this morning raises - - **is** about failure.

And the question - - I’m left pondering is this: who failed?

Is it *only* the **people** - - who fail to meet expectations?

Or does **God** sometimes fail?

At least as we see it...

Failing to meet - - our expectations...

The scripture reading for this morning is ancient. An early Old Testament prophet named Isaiah had watched the leaders of Israel struggle to survive the expansion of a mighty, wealthy, and powerful empire called Assyria.

Assyria was expanding and invading everything in its path. And in order to survive the leaders in both the north and the south, that is both Israel and Judah, they consider 'selling out'. They do this by forming an alliance. For the sake of survival...

But the prophet is made DISSONANT by their lack of faithfulness.

The prophet had expected so much more.

And so the reading for today begins by describing the love and care God had for these people. And then right after the love and care, the prophet reports God as frustrated and disappointed.

Love...

And disappointment...

Cognitive dissonance.

Sour grapes.

The gardener - - in the Old Testament - - had expected - - such - - sweet grapes...

But the vines produced wild, and sour grapes...

And so the prophet reports that God is angry and frustrated and will abandon them.

We can certainly understand God's frustration.

Who among us would want to be responsible - -

for the actions of everyone we meet?

We know all about human failure, and it's frustrating.

However.....

I think there is a much more controversial question:

Which is: what about God's failure?

If God was the original gardener, whose failure is this, really?

Could God be frustrated partly because God - - feels like a failure...?

Jesus on the cross centuries later couldn't have helped.

The cross is the ultimate failure, in the world's terms.

But:

Isn't it true that God's real power is found in weakness?

God's real strength is in forgiveness...is it not?

Mercy...

Grace...

Maybe disappointment - - is God's real home turf.

So what do we think about disappointment?

Two completely unconnected people, from two totally different time periods, offer wonderfully contradictory quotes about disappointment. Contemporary actress Cate Blanchet, and the nineteenth century preacher Henry Ward Beecher, present us with a choice of sorts, about the role of disappointment in our lives.

Cate Blanchett said this: "If I had my way, if I was lucky enough, if I could be on the brink my entire life - - that great sense of expectation and excitement - - *without* disappointment - - that would be the perfect state." Without disappointment...

Beecher, however once said that:

"The best successes - - come after the greatest disappointments"

So disappointment, yes or no...?

As if - - we really had a choice!

For me the real issue is how we *deal with* our disappointments.

And what role does God have in them...

Do we ever imagine - - that God is disappointed in us?

And - - are we ever - - disappointed in God?

Or disappointed - - with other people in our lives...?

And is it possible to be BOTH disappointed...and deeply in love at the same time?

Maybe *that's* easier said - - than done. / But think about it...

To be BOTH disappointed...and deeply in love at the same time

Can anyone relate to this...?

Whatever your answer to these questions, I think the heart of the matter for faith - - is the fact that God lives - - in this territory. The Bible is filled with frustrated expectations. Unfulfilled longings. And attempts at mercy, love and forgiveness.

And God is ALWAYS and forever choosing the unexpected.

Finding strength right at the very point of weakness.

Victory - - shoulder to shoulder with failure.

A word from Henri Nouwen is a helpful reminder to me at this point. The great spiritual writer and monastic has written this:

“What we feel is not who we are. A disappointment can trigger mood swings. And mostly we have little control over these things. But it is important to know that our emotional life is not the same as our spiritual life. What we feel is not who we are. No matter how we feel - - we are and we remain - - God’s beloved children.”

So maybe the role of a disappointment is to slow us down.

Maybe disappointments help us to re-examine our lives.

To take stock.

To get perspective.

As in this poem by Tony Hoagland, with which I'll close.:

Disappointment

I was feeling pretty religious
standing on the bridge in my winter coat
looking down at the gray water:
the sharp little waves dusted with snow,
fish in their tin armor.

That's what I like about disappointment:
the way it slows you down,
when the querulous insistent chatter of desire - - goes dead calm

and the minor roadside flowers
pronounce their quiet colors,
and the red dirt of the hillside glows.

She played the flute, he played the fiddle
and the moon came up over the barn.
Then he didn't get the job, —
or her father died before she told him
that one, most important thing—

and everything got still.

It was February or October
It was July
I remember it so clear
You don't have to pursue anything ever again
It's over
You're free
You're unemployed

You just have to stand there
looking out on the water
in your trench coat of solitude
with your scarf of resignation
lifting in the wind.

So whatever YOUR situation might be, remember...

This human life - - with all its disappointments - - IS God's territory.

And God deeply loves you and me.

And matter what.

And God wants the best for each one of us.

As God looks at us through the lens of Jesus life...

...there are NO sour grapes.

Only love.

Amen