

"What *in the World* Is Going On?"
August 14, 2016
Wauwatosa Avenue United Methodist Church
Rev. Tim Berlew

Albert took over an old, run-down, abandoned garden. The beds were overgrown with weeds, the shed was falling down, and the greenhouse was just a frame with broken glass. During his first day of work, the pastor stopped by to bless Albert's work, saying, "May you and God work together to make this the garden of your dreams!" A few months later, the pastor stopped by again. Lo and behold, it was completely transformed. The shed had been expertly rebuilt, vegetables were growing in neat rows and the greenhouse had been re-glazed and was full of plump, ripe tomatoes. "Amazing!" exclaimed the pastor. "Look what God and you have accomplished together!" "Yes, reverend," said Albert, "but remember what the place was like when God was working it alone!"

In our Isaiah reading this morning, we hear about a garden tended by God. It is a vineyard and God spares no effort or expense. Everything is done well. God even builds a watchtower – a home for a live-in gardener to keep things on track. God plants the very best grapes, and, after all, God should *know* which are the best! It comes time to harvest the grapes for winemaking and, lo and behold, the grapes are awful. They are not at all palatable. What went wrong?

When I lived in North Carolina, I bought a townhouse with a postage stamp-sized backyard. The soil was all red clay – only good for growing grass, if that. In that tiny fenced in area I hauled off lots of dirt and worked in 32 large bags of soil conditioner. By the end of the season, I had really good, rich soil. Over the next three years, I experienced what gardeners know to be the case with plants. The first year, they sleep; the second year, they creep; and the third year, they leap. By the third year, I was going out at least weekly to cut some of the vines back so as not to be completely overtaken. Yes, I did all the right things, and, for the most part, my garden was a raging success. However, there were a few plants that grew for my friends in their gardens, but they just did not thrive in mine. Some just plain died. I can sympathize with God in having a failure after doing all the right things.

But, as you can probably guess, this is not really a story about grapes and gardens. The vineyard is a metaphor for Israel and the gardener is God. As we read the Hebrew scriptures we see God rejoice in his love for Israel and the people they are, and we see God sorry to have ever called them "Chosen." This is one of the times, early in Isaiah's role as prophet, when God is disappointed in the people of Israel.

When we fast forward to today's gospel, we find a Jesus we would rather not encounter. We like to have our spiffed up, kind, holy, meek, and mild Jesus who loves and heals and feeds. Today it sounds as though he got up on the wrong side of the bed. "What makes you think I have come to bring peace. I have come to stir things up. I will not

help you to remain complacent. I am going to divide households. Brothers and sisters will fight among themselves. How do you like *that* for a Messiah?!"

Now, let's put a couple of things in context here. The gospels were among the last books of the New Testament to be written, even though they have been placed at the beginning. They were written for specific communities. It did not take Christianity long to run afoul of those in power. Most of the apostles ended up as martyrs. Over the next few hundred years, before Christianity became legal in 313 AD, there were many martyrs.

August 10th was the feast day of St. Lawrence. A well-known legend has persisted from earliest times. As deacon in Rome, St Lawrence was charged with the responsibility for the material goods of the Church and giving alms to the poor. Supposedly, when St Lawrence was asked for the treasures of the Church, he brought forward the poor, among whom he had divided the treasure as alms. "Behold in these poor persons the treasures which I promised to show you; to which I will add pearls and precious stones, those widows and consecrated virgins, which are the church's crown. The prefect was so angry that he had a great gridiron prepared, with coals beneath it, and had Lawrence's body placed on it. After the martyr had suffered the pain for a long time, the legend concludes, he made his famous cheerful remark, "I'm well done. Turn me over!" No wonder he became the patron saint of chefs, cooks, *and* comedians!

The times Jesus lived in were not so different from our time. Governments were corrupt. Politicians behaved badly. The poor were not treated well. Violence abounded. Even one of the 12 disciples belonged to a group that assassinated politicians. Simon the Zealot was a member of the Zealot party – a group of insurrectionists who travelled through crowds with knives under their robes. In the press of the crowd they would stab their political victim and disappear before anyone knew what had happened. Jesus really knew how to pick them! Another one was a tax collector – a known cheat and thief.

When we heard "For What It's Worth" at the beginning of the service, if you were really paying attention to the lyrics, I bet some of you got a little uncomfortable to hear these words, "There's something happening here. What it is ain't exactly clear. There's a man with a gun over there telling me I got to beware." No, this is not going to be a discussion of 2nd amendment rights. This song was written and recorded in 1966, then released in 1967. Some think it is a protest of the Viet Nam War. Some even think it was about the shootings at Kent State, though that happened several years after the release. Actually, it was a protest of the Sunset Strip curfew riots of November 1966. Some people did not like all the late night traffic of young people going to hear music at the clubs on Sunset Strip. They got the city government to put a curfew in place to stop the congestion. Buffalo Springfield had become the house band at Whiskey a Go Go on the Strip and they sang this song, written by Stephen Stills. It speaks to the feelings then and to the feelings some have now.

Paranoia strikes deep
Into your life it will creep

It starts when you're always afraid

You step out of line, the man come and take you away

As we listen to the news and hear all that is going on in the world – all the violence and killing – the loss of a way of life that used to give us comfort – the sense that “big brother” is always watching. “Stop, children, what’s that sound? Everybody watch what’s going down.” Last night in our own community that sound was a brick going through a police cruiser windshield, injuring the officer. It was the sound of a gas station and other buildings burning. It was the sound of gunshots and, what started as a peaceful demonstration about another shooting gone violent.

But, this should be no surprise. “Do you think that I have come to bring peace?” Perhaps that is really *our* job. When disparities are pointed out, do we just fight amongst ourselves, or do we seek to bring about change? As United Methodists, we know what the answer to that question ought to be. “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God.”

One area that we know is out of whack in our current culture is our prison and justice system. In the United States we jail more people than anyone else in the developed world. In Wisconsin, we jail more than any other state. Has that made us safer than other places in the world? I want to share some statistics with you.¹

- The prison population has increased from 300,000 people in the early 1970’s to 2.3 million people today.
- There are nearly 6 million people on probation or parole.
- One in every 15 people who was living in the United States in 2001 is expected to go to jail or prison
- One in every three black male babies born this century is expected to be incarcerated.
- Some states have no minimum age for prosecuting children as adults. We’ve sent 250,000 kids to adult jails and prisons to serve long prison terms. Some of them are under the age of 12!
- We have used prison to punish people with substance abuse problems. The number of people in state and federal prisons has gone from 41,000 in 1980 to over half a million.
- Many who have committed crimes only because of substance abuse or mental illness issues are serving time but getting no treatment. What happens then when they are released?

WISDOM, a statewide, faith-based social justice group has been working to get “treatment instead of prison” programs in place. It seems to be difficult for the state government to find the money for the programs, even though it costs a great deal more to keep people incarcerated than to treat them. The treatment instead of prison programs have been documented to have higher success rates than even some of the most expensive in-patient private treatment centers. Not being sent to prison turns out to be a good incentive.

When I was in Kenosha, I had a parishioner with serious diagnosed and medicated mental illness. He was African American and was picked up on a questionable charge and incarcerated for several months. Even though he was diagnosed and had meds prescribed, the jail would not allow him to take the drugs. As you can imagine, in a situation like that his paranoia escalated. It took several months after he was released to regain equilibrium.

“Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. No, I tell you, but rather division!” You may be thinking, I didn’t come to church to be brought down. Where is the good news? Where is the inspiration? Where is the part where I am fed something that will help get me through the next week? You may have noticed that I have not yet talked about the Letter to the Hebrews. Therein lies the good news. It tells a story of faith and hope. It talks about our ancestors in the faith who followed, even when they did not know where they were going. They understood that God was good and that God loved them no matter what. God was going to take them to a new place and a new way of living. The writer reminds us that, even in our confusion and misunderstanding, those who went before are a great cloud of witnesses around us. They give us strength to move ahead. We stand on their shoulders. We are running a race. At times it becomes tiring, but we press on keeping our eyes on Jesus, the prize. When we hear too much bad news and feel that the world is going to hell in a handbasket, we are told to look up. See Jesus who leads us forward. As Eugene Peterson puts the words of the Hebrews writer, “When you find yourselves flagging in your faith, go over that story again. *That* will shoot adrenaline into your souls.”

What a great week for this reading. If you have watched the Olympics at all, you’ve seen a lot of adrenaline coursing through the veins of those young athletes. As the church, we also need that burst. It is easy to fall into the responses of “business as usual” as we continue to do the things we’ve always done. We are part of a church that has been through lots of ups and downs over hundreds and even a couple thousand years. What if we approached church like Peter, Paul, and the original disciples? What if we couldn’t use those words, “We’ve never done it that way before” because, for them, they had never done it period. They saw new and exciting things happening. The book of Acts is not an organized, orderly, clean story. All kinds of things went awry. Constantly. But, when they found themselves “flagging in[their] faith, [they went] over that story again.” They looked at Jesus. They recognized who they were as God’s children. The adrenaline flowed and they shared God’s love with the world.

“Stop, children, what’s that sound? Everybody watch what’s going down.” What if what is going down is a changing world? What if new disciples are being made to transform the world? What if, as John the Baptist and Jesus said, “The kingdom of God is near?” We are people of the “What If?” Don’t sit there passively. We have work to do. We can resist, but remember, God always wins in the end and the victory has already been won --- no matter what the newscasters keep telling us! God has planted the vineyard. We are caring for it. We *are* it. May the fruit of our garden be sweet and unctuous.

ⁱ These statistics come from Bryan Stevenson, *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption*. (New York: Spiegel and Grau, 2014).