

While we officially concluded the Season of Creation last week, I am recalling from my first sermon in the series that many traditions conclude the season on *this* date, October 4, which is the Feast of St. Francis of Assisi.

All week I tried to come up with the right angle with which to deal with the allegory of the kin-dom of God being like a vineyard found in Isaiah, and Jesus' adaptation of it as a parable spotlighting the abuse of power by the religious leaders of his time.

I could have immediately jumped into pointing fingers at the abuses of power happening in the White House, the Capitol, or statehouses around the country. I thought about asking questions stemming from the two Creation stories in Genesis. How, in the first story, after creating humans in God's own image, the Maker of All looked around and declared it all very good? And in the second story, the authors focused on the first humans' encounter with a tree of knowledge of good and evil. Warned by the Creator that if they eat of its fruit, "you shall die," they can't help themselves. Well, as we know, they did help themselves to the fruit(!), and from that point on, God's relationship with them is fraught with struggle. Recall that the name Israel literally means "one who struggles with God."

At the simplest level, that's what the allegory in Isaiah and the parable in Matthew are about: humans struggling with God; struggling to keep God's most central commandment:

“4 Hear, O Israel: *Adonai* is our God, *Adonai* alone. 5 You shall love *Adonai* your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. 6 Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart.” (Deuteronomy 6)

And yet throughout the story of the Hebrews—and we Gentiles who inherited that story through Jesus, who, by the way, offered more specificity in the way we show love for God: by loving our neighbor as we love ourselves—the command isn’t kept in our hearts. Or, if it is, we have a funny way of showing it.

Explain to me the ethic of love that is evident in children within our school district who do not have three solid meals to eat; or a young woman on a college campus who isn’t protected from predators who feel society gives them permission to violate her; or where bombs fall down on beleaguered families in Gaza or Ukraine; or the loss of an unknown microorganism whose generational glacial habitat has dried up, never to reemerge.

Humanity has failed to meet the love command.

Genesis 1 tells us that after six days of creating, “God saw all that God had made, and it was very good (m’ōḏ {meh-ode’} tōv).” This explains the profound sadness in the voice of the vineyard creator in Isaiah’s story. A beautiful, abundant space, cultivated to supply the necessities of life, so that all those who share the “vineyard” may thrive with one another. Instead, as Isaiah voices the Creator, “I expected it to yield grapes,

but it yielded rotten grapes. ...(I) expected justice, but saw bloodshed; righteousness but heard a cry!”

“How is it,” I wondered aloud to myself, “that human beings have spent so much energy on being rotten? What inner emotional yen does bad behavior satiate?”

Clearly, through the biblical witness, this is a forever problem. Act up, and God sends prophets to warn that the bad behavior will have severe consequences. And it’s rebuffed—often violently—by the establishment.

Create such rules that everyday faithful folk can’t have access to their own worship center without paying a tax, and God’s Word becomes flesh and lives among us ...

“full of grace and truth.” (John 1:14) Jesus couldn’t be ignored, but he could be killed.

When Jesus exposed the hypocrisy of the “caretakers of the vineyard,” it was easier to get rid of him than to admit they had allowed hunger for power to rule their hearts rather than love.

In my naivete, I’ve wondered: Why would people want to waste so much energy on doing harm—hurting others, angling themselves to grasp societal advantages to the detriment of others?

To use the analogy of the good and rotten grapes, are some people just born bad?

My gut says, “No.”

I tend to believe that all are born predisposed to goodness, by which I guess I mean wanting what’s best for the well-being of others as well as themselves. But

circumstances and environments can form within people a permission to act badly. And others suffer because of it.

These inclinations for addressing these texts may be provocative ways of entering the message. But I decided it was really wasted energy.

Of what benefit is it to my spirit and soul to point fingers and lay blame at the feet of others? How am I enriching my spiritual life by heaping the onus of evil and bad behavior upon others?

Instead, how can we better use our energy to face toward goodness?

If the supposition above is that circumstances and environments can form people to act badly, then circumstances and environments can also form people to act benevolently.

I recently read a quote from Dorothy Day, a 20th-century Christian advocate for the poor and marginalized, that said:

“We have to create an environment where it is easier to be good.”

This, I believe, is the call to be found in these cautionary stories from the Bible. The vineyard is not simply a picture of what humanity has ruined. It is also a picture of what God has entrusted to us. The question is not only why the vineyard has

produced rotten grapes. The question is: **What can we do to cultivate a different harvest?**

That's why it is appropriate that we are worshipping together on the feast of St. Francis of Assisi. Francis (1182–1226) was born to a merchant family in the Italian city of Assisi. As a young man, he was attracted to adventure and moved by romantic tales of knights. When he himself became a knight, Francis met a leper while riding through the countryside. Overwhelmed by a divine impulse, Francis dismounted his horse, shared his coat with the leper, and kissed the man's diseased face.

Captivated by the experience, Francis began *to re-imagine his life in light of the gospel*, renouncing his selfish desires and his father's wealth.

One of the prominent bits of St. Francis' lore occurred when he was praying before a crucifix in the dilapidated chapel of San Damiano, Francis of Assisi heard a voice speak to him: "Francis, repair my church, which has fallen into disrepair, as you can see."

"Repair my church."

Perhaps Francis initially understood those words literally. The chapel around him was falling apart. But Francis came to understand that the church needing repair was much larger than the walls of San Damiano.

The church was the people of God. The church was the community. The church was the world. The church's understanding of itself within the world is what needed repairing.

And perhaps that is one reason why another of the most famous stories about Francis is the story of the Wolf of Gubbio.

A massive, ravenous wolf was terrorizing the village, slaughtering livestock and devouring townspeople who ventured outside the gates.

While the villagers took up weapons to hunt the beast, Francis opted for peace. He walked unprotected into the woods to find the wolf. When the beast charged him with open jaws, Francis made the sign of the cross and said, "Come to me, Brother Wolf. In the name of Christ, I order you not to hurt anyone."

The wolf immediately closed its mouth and lay at Francis's feet like a pet dog.

Francis brokered a peace treaty between the two sides:

- He did not excuse the wolf's violence. But neither did he reduce the wolf to its violence. He looked beneath the behavior and saw hunger.
- He promised that the townspeople would feed the wolf every day if it stopped attacking them.
- The wolf placed its front paw into Francis's hand to seal the oath.
- The wolf lived peacefully in Gubbio for two years, wandering the streets and being fed by the locals until it died of old age.

Whether or not we take every detail of the story literally, there is a truth that comes from this allegory.

Following Jesus calls us to train our instincts to lean first into compassion before arming ourselves for a fight.

It asks us to imagine that even what appears to be “rotten” may have a story behind it. It asks us to consider that hunger—literal or metaphorical—can shape behavior. And it asks us what kind of environment we are creating around ourselves and within our communities.

Are we creating environments in which it is easier to be good?

Or are we creating environments in which fear, scarcity, competition, resentment, and the hunger for power make it easier to become something other than the people God created us to be?

The vineyard in Isaiah began as a place of beauty and abundance. Genesis tells us that God looked upon all that had been made and declared it very good. The problem was never that God had failed to provide enough goodness. The problem was what human beings did with what we had been given.

And so perhaps the question before us is not simply, “Who is to blame?”

Perhaps the more faithful question is, “What kind of vineyard are we cultivating?”

Or, “What kind of harvest will our lives make possible?”

What kind of environment are we creating for our children, our neighbors, our communities, our enemies, and for the generations who will come after us?

What would happen if we spent less of our energy identifying the rotten grapes and more of our energy cultivating good ones?

What would happen if, like Francis, we trained our instincts to lean first toward compassion?

What would happen if we took seriously the possibility that our calling is to “repair” the church—not simply its buildings or institutions, but the relationships, communities, and creation entrusted to our care?

I will continue to believe that people hold goodness in their hearts.

And I will continue to believe that the world God created is very good.

Our task is to cultivate that goodness.

To create environments where it is easier to be good.

To love God with all our heart, soul, and might—and to make that love visible by loving our neighbors as ourselves.

And when the time comes for the owner of the vineyard to inspect our work, may the harvest be sweet grapes: justice instead of bloodshed, righteousness instead of a cry, compassion instead of violence, and love instead of fear.

And may the One who planted this beautiful vineyard be pleased with our stewardship of the kin-dom.