

## **“Wild Grapes”**

Sermon by Rev. Leah Fowler  
Presbyterian Church in Leonia  
August 14, 2016

Isaiah 5:1-7

Luke 12:49-56

In his book *Far From the Tree*, author Andrew Solomon explores families in which the parents have kids who are so different from them-- whether due to disability, being transgender, being on the autism spectrum, or in one case, a mother whose child was conceived through rape. He shares at how these families struggle to love their children for who they are, and not who they might have been. He finally concludes, “Parenting is no sport for perfectionists!”

Hopefully God is not a perfectionist. Because we can see many times in the bible in which the apple does fall far from the tree. In fact, the apple didn’t even have to fall because we plucked it off the tree and ate it when God warned us not to! Instead of relying on God’s careful formation, the abundant rain, the direction of the sun’s encouraging light, the people Israel have become a wild harvest.

Some of you may know that I am focusing my Doctorate of Ministry degree on pastoral care. I have finished my coursework and am in the research stage of my program-- hopefully just one year more. My thesis will focus on pastoral care with adoptive families...

One article I read really moved me. A woman told about adopting her daughter. For various reasons-- it could have been earlier traumas the girl had experienced before adoption at five years old; it could have been mental illness inherited genetically, or the effects of drugs or alcohol use during pregnancy-- this child could not attach to her adoptive family.

They questioned whether she could even experience love; any sign of affection was always used as currency to manipulate her parents to give her what she wanted. This was probably an early-learned survival skill, their family therapist said, and warned that the child may never move beyond such an early-laid pattern. Regardless, the parents worked hard at loving their daughter unconditionally, while still steering her toward better behavior and trying to get her help through therapy and other community resources.

But every act of love was hurled back as a dagger. It shook the values that had served them so well in parenting their other kids. It was starting to damage the parents' marriage, not to mention the well-being of their other children. Finally one night, the husband and wife looked at each other and admitted that they didn't like their daughter. They didn't love their daughter. Together, husband and wife made a pact. They decided they would not love their daughter. Loving her tore them up too much-- it was too painful to be vulnerable in love with her. But they promised each other they would *pretend* to love her. So, they went about parenting, taking special time to stroke her hair at night when they tucked her in. With each damaging act she threw at her family, they would firmly guide her back toward their expectations even though they sincerely doubted these expectations could ever be met. Because they had closed off part of their hearts to their daughter, they were less wounded each time she rejected their love and care-- but their actions indicated they loved her as they loved the other two kids.

This went on for a while, until the child started to show loving behavior back at the parents. At first the parents did not notice, since the loving part of their hearts were closed toward their daughter. Then they noticed the "I love you" casually said on Tuesday, the random hug on Friday, and the sharing with a sibling the next Tuesday were neither isolated cases nor manipulative ploys-- indeed, other such actions had been happening as well that they hadn't even thought to notice. The parents caucused again and agreed: maybe their daughter was growing the capacity to love. In modeling love--even when their hearts were not in it-- they were able to awaken their daughter's own ability to give and receive love.

Many parents of difficult kids reach the breaking point with their kids when they realize they must change their mode of parenting because it just isn't working. Now I recognize that the parent metaphor for God doesn't work for everyone-- I for one at least try to throw a Mother God in there now and then with all those Father God images-- because while some have had great or at least good enough parents, others have been terribly failed by their parents. Others have never experienced being parents, either by choice or by circumstance, and know there are plenty of other rich metaphors out there to describe relationship. Certainly the notion of an angry parent God has scarred more than a few would-be Christians.

But here in Isaiah we have a vineyard keeper-- albeit an angry one. Why is God so mad? Well, God expected justice, and saw bloodshed; righteousness, but heard a cry. The English translation misses the word play that's there when looking at the original Hebrew. God expected *mishpat*, justice, and saw *mispakh*, bloodshed and God wanted righteousness, *tsedaquh* but got a cry, *tse'aqah*. What was happening? The first verse following this passage suggest an economic injustice: joining house to house, adding field to field, until there is no room left for anyone but you. We have corrupt leaders who accept bribes and deprive the innocent of their rights. Is this Donald Trump, Monsanto, and any of a number of NJ politicians, or is it any of us who participate in privilege that survives off of others' sufferings?

In Jesus, God chooses a refining fire rather than a punishing destruction. Jesus announces, "I came to bring fire to the earth and how I wish it was already kindled!" And the one we call the Prince of Peace challenges, "Do you think that I have come to bring peace on the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!" Jesus might have been referring to the *Pax Romana*, which was not a true peace but rather a coercive subdual of all voices dissident to the interests of the Emperor. In other words, if you did not support what the Emperor wants, then you do not enjoy the privilege of peace. In more contemporary experience, I see so many of the conflicts happening in the world as a response to the unfitting borders left by colonial rule, that undermined local leadership and upset tribal networks. It will probably get worse before it can get better.

I remember when I was in college, my friend Rachel discovered a letter to the president and dean of the college. It was in response to a workshop that had been required in the dorms for all first-year students. The workshop had been a training in making the dorms safe space, without homophobia. Several first-year students disagreed with the requirement that they attend the training, hence the letter-- which was signed by 20 students.

Someone involved with the letter had forgotten to take the original out of the copier after making copies-- which is where my friend Rachel found it. The letter had choice phrases such as “there is a reason God destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah” and was overall hurtful to students who care for gay people or may have been gay themselves. Wanting to expose homophobia on campus and get people talking about it, my friend Rachel made hundreds of copies of the letter and then stuffed it into random mailboxes. The student center was abuzz with news of this letter. Some wondered why they received it; others wondered why they didn’t get one. People started identifying the students who signed on to the letter-- and it soon became apparent that all who signed were of one minority race on campus. The tension on campus became heavy: gay students were starting to show their racism; people of color were starting to show their homophobia; and the students who were gay AND people of color found themselves without a tribe.

The college-- a Presbyterian-related women’s college-- that had at first felt to me like a close sisterhood quickly became a place where no one felt safe. The president and dean, who would have probably contained the contents of the letter to a small meeting in their offices, had a huge mess to sort through. Someone had the idea to bring in the National Coalition Building Institute. I tell you, the first day was painful and hard. NCBI had an agitational model, in which they invite and push people to say the kinds of things that you think, but know better than to actually say-- in the presence of those who would be most personally offended. It was troubling but it also helped clear the air and create trust, because seeing all cards stacked on the table, even the nasty ones, made us more authentic in what we said from there. We also had the chance to hear the impact of our thoughts on

others. We became accountable to our thoughts and actions as we grew also in accountability toward our peers across boundaries. I came to realize that I was taught racism by people who loved and nurtured me. Rejecting racism meant, in a sense, rejecting some of the family values I had inherited. I would still have racist thoughts, but as they passed through my head I would wonder how that idea would impact Jamela or Rhiannon on my hall, or Asiyah from my lunch table, or any of the the lives that had come to matter to me.

Jesus modeled a new social and spiritual order, and he knew it would clash with old and accepted ways. Jesus knew that answering the call to discipleship would require-- at times-- turning against the values passed on from father to son, as well as the values of the established religious order and the values of empire. Jesus is telling his followers that they will become fruit that will fall far from the tree. But when we become that fruit, that is a fruit that God can work with! *Jesus* is the vine, and *we* are the branches. Imagine the flavorful juice such fruit might become. Imagine how robust the flavor, when we are nourished and fed by Jesus' modeling! Amen.