

“Great Expectations,” Isaiah 5:1-7; Luke 12:49-56; 8/19/07; Albany UMC

There are many ways to express our affection toward our children. It does not matter what culture you are in, nor how old you are, because out of love, parents want to say and do many different things for their children. And as caring and loving parents, we have some expectations of our children. We want them to be happy; we want them to succeed. More importantly, we want them to be right. We do not want them to be in any kind of trouble.

The same thing with God: see God first in the Garden of Eden, creating a perfect place for humankind to enjoy, multiply, and thrive. See God’s great expectations in the call of Abram from the dusty land of Chaldeans. He was just an old man with nothing in his hand. No children. But one day, God calls him saying, “Hey, my son, listen to me. I will make you the father of many nations. Look up the heaven, how many stars do you think you see up there?”

I am making a promise to you. Your descendents will be just like that many.

Look in the New Testament: God in Jesus Christ calls the unlikely, the unloved, the un-forgiven, and the unwanted; and worked with them to create a new community of love where all people are welcome. This is the picture of God whose great expectations for all of us never stops throughout all the pages of the Holy Bible.

I think today’s Isaiah text is one of the good examples from which we can hear God’s love song for the Israelites, especially the first two verses: in the NIV translation-- *I will sing (for the one I love) a song about his vineyard: My loved one had a vineyard on a fertile hillside. He dug it up and cleared it of stones and planted it with the choicest vines.*

Many of us have been to Napa or Sonoma County or have seen pictures of their beautiful vineyards. The Spirit of God is using the same imagery here in verse 1: “a vineyard on a fertile hillside.”

Planting a vineyard can never be done overnight. It takes a lot of time and money. I was told that some good wineries invest millions of dollars in the development of a vineyard that may not produce its best fruits until decades later. Lots of patience and lots of care and investments are necessary. The same is true with God. The verse 2 says, God “dug it,” cleared it of all kinds of rocks and stones, and planted it with the best vines. All God wanted was

the best fruits from the vines. So God would do anything in his vineyard if it was to yield the most delicious grapes.

But all is not well. The music that at first was a love song now becomes a sort of funeral song. God is disappointed. God's great expectations of the people of Israel went sour. The scripture says, the vineyard produced "wild grapes."

In Luke, we also see Jesus who is very upset and throwing out those harsh words. Jesus says, "I came to bring fire to the earth." He also says: "Do you think that I came to give you peace. I tell you, no, rather division."

Wow! How can you teach or preach on this?

We know Christianity is a religion of peace. We believe that Christ is the Prince of Peace. That means believers can seek personal healing and forgiveness. It means our faith promises contentment and personal security in the here and now and entry to heaven at the moment of death. We refer to nice, kind, gentle people as "Christians."

But that is not all. We seem to have forgotten that "Jesus was crucified." The Romans did not give him an award for keeping Jewish citizens quiet and content. Most of his apostles were also killed violently by the hands of those who were outraged at the changes the first Christians wanted to make both in society and in the lives of individuals.

Pliny was governor of a province in Asia Minor. He wrote a letter to the Roman emperor telling him that he didn't know what these Christians believed exactly, but that they were the most willful, rebellious, disobedient people he had ever encountered. Therefore he had put some of them to death just on general principles. (esermon.com, Pliny, Letters X, p. 96)

Why, then, were the first Christians that radical? To them, it was right thing to do. To them, faith was not just about being a good person or looking nice; it was about responding to God's expectations. It was about following Jesus who gave his life to save the world. Jesus wanted to save the world, rather than giving himself into the world. He saw that there was a fine line between the order of world and the order of God's kingdom. He did not want to get himself mixed up with those two values. Jesus saw that there has to be division or separation or crisis within us, first, for us to be part of this new

order, God's order, new life, and the promise of God's kingdom.

The world teaches you to be rich. The world honors you when you become high. The world follows you when you have power. When you have all these, the world will say to you, "Wow! You're great. You made a success." But, Jesus said, "You cannot serve God and the money at the same time." "You must serve others than to be served." "You have to share with others."

God's expectations of Israelites in Isaiah was very clear: If we look up Isaiah 1:11-17, God is not so impressed with how we worship: what hymns we sing; what denomination we belong, who is theologically right, etc. God is rather more concerned about our doing right. God is more interested in our seeking justice; and seeking justice involves defending the orphan, pleading for the widow, and helping with the oppressed.

In Luke, Jesus says that the gospel is so radical that the world will experience it as fire raining from heaven. Jesus tells those of us who strive to follow him even today that when his message sinks into our hearts and minds, it can cause trouble in our families.

If we choose to follow Christ, we can get in trouble at work because we have to tell the truth. This Gospel can have a negative impact on our friendships. If we take our faith seriously, we can plan on losing enemies because God commands that we commit ourselves to turning enemies into friends. If we really want to be right and keep our faith alive, we may have to raise our voices in our society and end up in jail.

Living the Christian life is costly. Indeed, it is an expensive journey. But it is a worth journey. It is worth way more than we can imagine because God's promise is there.

In human relationships, our expectations for someone decrease if our love for the person cools down. The same thing is true: our expectations of God sometimes wane as things do not go well. But God's expectations of us never change; they always remain the same because God's love for us never changes. God's love for us is always more than our love for Him.

May God bless us and sustain us in loving and responding to His loving expectations. Amen.