

Maybe you've walked through a garden and seen these words on a plaque or some sort of decoration: "The kiss of the sun for pardon, the song of the birds for mirth, one is nearer God's heart in a garden than anywhere else on earth." If you enjoy gardening, you know it's not quite as idyllic as Dorothy Francis Guerney's poem suggests. Have you ever gotten poison ivy or chigger bites; had the shock of seeing a snake or had your back thrown out in the garden? Maybe there's more to God than sunshine and singing birds. Yes, the garden teaches you about both the magnificence of creation and how sin has corrupted God's creation.

Today's Old Testament lesson is about a vineyard—not a garden—but the appeal of gardens and vineyards is very much the same. This text tells us that the Lord loved the vineyard He planted.

Let's hear about that again in verses 1 and 2: "¹Let me sing for my beloved my love song concerning his vineyard: My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. ²He dug it and cleared it of stones and planted it with choice vines; he built a watchtower in the midst of it and hewed out a wine vat in it; " But now comes a twist; things aren't so idyllic in the vineyard. "And he looked for it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes." And then it continues on in verses 3 and 4: "³And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem and men of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard. ⁴What more was there to do for my vineyard, that I have not done in it? When I looked for it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes?"

Wild grapes, weeds in the garden! Did you ever plant something in the garden that turned out so bad that you uprooted it? "And now I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard," the Lord announces beginning in verse 5. "I will remove its hedge, and it shall be devoured; I will break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down. ⁶I will make it a waste; it shall not be pruned or hoed, and briers and thorns shall grow up; I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it."

It's enough to make you think twice about being "nearer God's heart in a garden."

Jesus used the image of a vineyard in today's gospel, Matthew 21:33–46. A man planted a garden and rented it out to tenants. But when the owner sent servants to collect the rent, the tenants killed the servants. In exasperation, he sent his son, and they killed him. Jesus asked his hearers what the owner would do. "He will put those wretches to a miserable death and let out the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the fruits in their seasons" (21:41).

Looking for grapes, precious grapes, the owner instead got **wild** grapes, and they killed his son to boot.

This text isn't about vineyards or gardens. It's about the **people of God**, ancient Israel and you and me today. Let's go back to the text one more time, this time to verse 7: "For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah are his pleasant planting; and he looked for justice, but behold, bloodshed; for righteousness, but behold, an outcry!"

God loved His Israel, His "pleasant planting." He planted them to do good works, specifically to bring justice and righteousness to all people, but they gave him "wild grapes." Their works were bloodshed and outcries. Today you and I are God's people, His "pleasant planting" by baptism into our Lord Jesus and the Christian faith. Why did God plant that vineyard in Isaiah? Why did God bring **you** into the church? Because He loves you. The church is His planting, His vineyard. It's not really "our" church. And God does the work for His church. Like preparing a vineyard or garden, He plants us by baptism and He lovingly grows us by His teaching and preaching and supper. It's His work in us, and in return He looks for us to produce "grapes," good works for His delight. This pleasant planting of the church is all centered in Jesus, the beloved Son who died, rose, and gives us His Holy Spirit. Jesus says, "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing" (Jn 15:1, 5). Where are we "nearest God's heart?" When we are thankful beyond words because He has made us part of His pleasant planting through Jesus Christ.

We don't always do that, do we? We bear wild grapes instead of righteousness and justice for all people. That's why God keeps sending us the prophets and apostles, sermons and Bible studies, and conversations with fellow Christians. We're in the time of grace, God's goodness leading us to repentance (Rom 2:4). This pleasant planting is about love, God's love to us in Jesus and our grateful love that yields good works for Him, "fruits that befit repentance" (Mt 3:8). Jesus says, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments" (Jn 14:15). In the love of Jesus, the church is God's pleasant planting, and with one another we are nearest to God's heart . . . until He takes us home.