

He reached out to wrap his arms around his beloved, but there was no return of his affection. He offered a kiss to the one his heart was set upon, but she turned her head away so that his kiss met only her cold cheek. He lavished so many gifts upon her, but her gratitude was only momentary, her thanks perfunctory.

Her arms were clinging too much to herself to be able to reach out to him. Only in a mirror did her eyes see the sparkle in the eyes of the one she loved most. And the gifts he gave only ~~increased her appetite for more.~~ ^{made her think that she was deserving of more.}

Do I speak of a man and a woman? No, of God and his people.

All that God wanted of Israel was that they would delight in him as much as he delighted in them. Why he fell in love with them we do not know. But that God chose one people for his very own, his beloved, we do know.

A father and his son, a man and his wife, an eagle and her young, all of these are Biblical images of the love and care of God for his people.

And a vineyard and its owner.

Isaiah spoke of God as having a vineyard, that he carefully tended, waiting for it to yield grapes, but it yielded only wild grapes.

So when Jesus told his vineyard story, his hearers knew who he was talking about. It would be kind of like our telling a story about a man named Uncle Sam. We'd all know who he represented.

A man planted a vineyard and leased it to tenants, and went to another country for a long time. When the season came, he sent a slave to the tenants in order that they might give to him his share of the produce of the vineyard; but the tenants beat him and sent him away empty handed. Next he sent another slave; that one also they beat and ~~insulted~~ and sent away empty-handed. And he sent still a third; this one also they wounded

and threw out. Then the owner of the vineyard said, What shall I do? I will send my beloved son; perhaps they will respect him. But when the tenants saw him, they said, This is the heir, let us kill him so that the inheritance may be ours. So they threw him out of the vineyard and killed him, What then will the owner of that vineyard do to them? He will come and destroy those tenants and give the vineyard to others.

After more than a thousand years, God had come down to his last effort. Through judges and kings and prophets and priests God had tried to win the hearts of his people. Now in Jesus he had sent his Son.

And they took him outside of the city of Jerusalem and killed him.

They might have embraced him, and worshipped him, and obeyed him. But instead they crucified him, the beloved Son of God.

Like a parent whose eyes are finally opened to the child's irresponsibility, like a wife who finally realizes her love will never keep her husband from straying, like a grieving child who finally sees that breath will not return to the form in the coffin, God moved on. In Christ he turned to embrace another, a new Israel, people of every race and nation. A bride for Christ to love, out of the death and resurrection of Jesus, God created the church.

We are now the ones in God's embrace. We are the bride of Christ ^{to} upon whom he gives every good and perfect gift. He loves us more than any parent has loved any child, more than any man has loved a woman, more than he has loved even his own life.

Now we tend his vineyard, he waits for its fruit from us.

Will his loving kiss be greeted with our cold cheek? His embrace met with our indifference, his gifts tossed aside, unappreciated, unused?

Do we wound his slave who come asking of us, lock up the vineyard for our own needs and use only? Do we hoard what God has given for all the world, and for the poor?

The people who heard Jesus tell his parable didn't like what they heard. They wanted to hear Jesus say that Rome was the problem, or that people on welfare, or crack dealers or labor unions or politicians or school administrators or big business, or too much taxation was the problem. Someone else, but surely not me.

~~But~~ God puts this parable before our eyes today, nearly two thousand years after Jerusalem was destroyed, He does not bring it before us that we might gloat, but that each of us might take an honest look at the only one over whom we have any power.

How have I hurt my neighbors whom God has called me to love. How have my harsh words, my cold shoulder, my bitter heart beaten and wounded them? How has the judgement I have pronounced on them in my heart insulted these whom God has sent? How do I daily murder the very ones God has declared his beloved children?

There is not one of us here who has loved as we have been loved. There is not one of us here who can hear this parable of Jesus and think he tells it for someone else. As Paul says, Jesus has made us his own, now will we make him our own? Will we love him as he deserves our love, with all our heart and soul and mind and strength? Will we gladly give him the fruit of his vineyard, our lives?

Will you?