

## Provoking God's Providence

Isaiah 5:1-7

Luke 12:49-56

“What more was there to do for my vineyard that I have not done in it?”

I invite you, on this steamy Sunday morning in the middle of August, to remember a particular sort of relationship gone awry. Not so much your first, breathless love in high school or even a breakup that is almost too recent to bear, but remember a friendship in which you considered yourself the giver and the friend the taker until it blew up; or think of a time in your relationship with a child when you did everything you knew how to do to create the conditions for a meaningful life to no avail; or maybe you grew up with a parent you could never please, no matter how hard you tried or supervised a colleague who continually let you down: the point is to imagine a relationship in which you are the one who has given everything you conceivably could have given to make the relationship work. You put your own dreams on hold in order to support his; you were her champion in the face of everyone else's better judgment; you were generous, so generous with your time and your heart and your understanding and your patience--utterly available for the other's needs--that when things fell apart, you were dumbfounded before you were furious.

So it was with God and Israel. In the song Isaiah sings, God is the vintner and Israel the vineyard; God the giver and Israel the taker. The vintner planted his vineyard on a very fertile hill. He cleared the hill of stones (no small feat in Israel, as you know if you have ever been there), planted choice vines with care, watched over the vineyard day and night, and, in anticipation of the harvest, built a wine vat. Season after season, the vintner lavished his beloved vineyard with good things and lived in high expectation that the first harvest would result in a remarkable vintage. But finally the prophet sings that the vineyard yielded only wild grapes, grapes that were bitter, sour, useless.

Stepping out of the metaphor, God had chosen Israel out of all the peoples on earth, had promised them a destination, had accompanied them in the wilderness, had ordered their common life with the gift of Torah, had kept them in life—feeding, sheltering, protecting, and nurturing them. What comes to mind when I read these familiar verses in Isaiah is the working of God's providence: God's providing for God's creatures night and day. As the Westminster Confession puts it, “God, the great Creator of all things, doth uphold, direct, dispose and govern all creatures, actions, and things, from the greatest even to the least, by his most wise and holy providence....” We often use providence in a sentence when, to our surprise, some circumstance anonymously coincides with our need. “It was providential that the train came at just that time” or “How providential that we ran into each other on the street corner.”

In truth, God's providence is active in every moment of our lives. “The general theme of providence,” Princeton professor George Hendry explains, “is the relation of God to his creation.” “God's works of providence,” according to the Shorter Catechism, “are God's most holy and wise and powerful preserving and governing all his creatures and his actions.” This is no interventionist God but a God who literally gives us each breath. Yet in the same breath, according to this doctrine, God grants us a relative but real independence.” I think of the last scene in “Oh God,” a 70's movie only a few in this sanctuary will remember. In it, John Denver plays the part of a grocery store manager who is suddenly privy to God's presence and pronouncements. George Burns, in his 98<sup>th</sup> year, cigar and all, plays God. At the end of the movie, Denver asks God what he is supposed to do now that God is done appearing to him. God answers, “Tell everyone that it can all work. I've given you everything you need to be happy. The rest is up to you.” So it is that God is providing all that creation needs to have life and have it abundantly while leaving us relatively free to become “sour grapes.”

From the perspective of the vineyard—the perspective of the taker in any given relationship--our relative freedom is often exercised in three souring ways: a life of complaint; a life of complacency; or a life that mistakes freedom for license. We complain that the giver does not meet our needs as we want them met. Hendry says our complaint, for the most part, confuses the workings of God's providence with the workings of God's salvation. We expect God to act in history and in our personal histories to heal every disease, end every conflict, prevent natural disasters, keep us and those we love from accident or chance. In short, we expect God's final purposes to be accomplished in our lifetime. “But God's providential dealings with the world are not definitive,” Hendry says. “God's final purpose with the world is its salvation (its life lived in and with the love that God is), and God's providential dealings with creation are ‘provisional’ or instrumental to that end.” God's providence cannot keep us in life indefinitely because the kind of life we have been given is mortal life. As takers of this good gift of mortal life, we complain and rail against the limits. Sour grapes!

Or if we do not complain, if life unfolds in pleasant ways for a considerable stretch, we simply receive all that is given with no hint of gratitude—the entitled life of the complacent. In fact, we come to expect, in a First World sort of way, food on the table, a roof over our heads, meaningful work to do, health and love and longevity. Here we tend to confuse what we are given freely by God's hand with what we deserve because we are morally upright, work hard, mind our manners, stay in our lane. There is no awe or astonishment at the sun or moon or stars; no thanks returned for the air we breathe or the ground we tread or the ones by our side; no delight in the beauty that meets our eyes in the created world. We go through

the motions never acknowledging the God who has given us all things. Sour grapes masquerading as complacent, entitled children.

Or we squander what we have been given, prodigals mistaking freedom for license. I think of Adam's rant in Davie Napier's poetic midrash on Genesis "Come Sweet Death":

Now hear this, Lord: the Giver with the gift  
Is strictly for the birds and fish and beasts.  
I am a Man, made in the godly image,  
made to receive and rule the gift of God.  
God is for giving. Given, then, and get out....

The earth belongs to me, and all its fullness,  
the world and every living creature in it;  
since it was I who named each single item  
in this vast, complicated, awesome structure.

Dominion given cannot be reclaimed.  
By act of God, this land is man's dominion  
From this day forth, and evermore forever.

Water and air polluted, resources squandered or hoarded, justice denied, violence lauded, simply everything a zero sum game in the vineyard where our licentious living yields only sour grapes.

What began as the prophet's song sung on behalf of the God of Israel, now is taken up by God whose voice continues in lament, asking as only a Giver can ask: "What more was there to do for my vineyard that I have not done it in?" It is the spurned lover's question, the abandoned friend's question, the parent's cry in the face of a child's rejection. Yet here it is God's question, echoing down the dark corridors of human history, taking to heart our complaints, our complacency, our autonomous cries, our sour grapes. What more could God have given us beyond this good earth and all that is in it, what more than the companions by our side and a purpose that lends meaning to our days, what more than God's accompanying us, even into the grave, until we reach our final destination in God's love.

Now the more God does in Isaiah's song is less: God leaves the vineyard to its own devices. God withdraws, it seems to me, as if God has been the enabler of Israel's selfish binge. Now the Almighty powerless God watches, as the Father of the prodigal must have watched his son disappear down the road; now the Creator of Heaven and Earth retreats into heaven and lets us have at each other. "Ah," God warns, "you who join house to house, who add field to field, until there is room for no one but you, and you are left to live alone in the midst of the land!" Ahead for Israel is defeat at the hand of Assyria and exile into Babylon; ahead in each human life curved in on itself is the chaos that inevitably reigns among those who take the gift without thanks, hoard it for themselves, and spurn the Giver.

Eventually we know that the more God does do includes the return of the exiles from Babylon; and the more God gives, in the fullness of time, is God's Son. In him God's providence and God's salvation are joined: God in Christ upholding the lives of those he encounters, God in Christ directing our lives in words we can understand, God in Christ giving us a glimpse of our salvation as he heals and so reveals what life will be when we dwell in God's love. You would think Jesus Christ would be just the more we need to become a fine vintage of human being. Yet by the time Jesus turns his face toward Jerusalem in Luke's Gospel, the harvest he predicts is a harvest of division that continues to this day. Instead of justice, there is bloodshed; in the place of righteousness, a cry!

What more is there for God to do? "I have given you everything you need," George Burns tells John Denver. "The rest is up to you." God's providence "presupposes that the work of creation is finished," I repeat, "so that the creation stands over against the Creator with a relative but real independence." Therefore it is up to us to spent the week we are about to be given simply noticing the multitude of ways God preserves and upholds us, accompanies us and waits for us to turn toward home. Where to begin? What if, with poet Mary Oliver in "The Summer Day" we simply asked with every breath

Who made the world?  
Who made the swan and the black bear?  
Who made the grasshopper?  
This grasshopper, I mean—  
the one who has flung herself out of the grass,  
the one who is eating sugar out of my hand,  
who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up and down—  
who is gazing around with her enormous and complicated eyes....  
I don't know exactly what a prayer is.

I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down  
into the grass, how to kneel in the grass,  
how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,  
which is what I have been doing all day.  
Tell, me, what else should I have done?  
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?  
Tell me what is it you plan to do  
With your one wild and precious life?

It is up to us to quit our complaints in favor of a word of gratitude. It is up to us to counter our complacency with an act of giving ourselves away without counting the cost. It is up to us to check our license with an act of humble obedience that might actually set us free! Thanks be to God!