

## Viticulture

First Reading: Isaiah 5:1-7

Second Reading: John 15:1-8

Admittedly, I am a rube, a yokel, a hick, a bumpkin, an ill-refined exemplar of uncivilized cluelessness. I take no pride in that. It is just the inevitable takeaway from time spent in my presence. To put it in context, in my corner of the college dorm, there were five of us from my little hometown plus one kid from the affluent suburbs of Kansas City. It was quickly intuited that he was more worldly and culturally attuned than the rest of us. And one afternoon, he was telling us about the romantic date he had planned for the night, setting a scene including soft music, candles, TJ Swan (Mellow Nights), saltines, and Cheez Whiz — and this was supposed to be the sophisticated one among us!

To us, the Hamptons wasn't a summer destination but a local family with a plumbing business. Rube, yokel, hick, bumpkin, the kind of guy who would exclaim — *Well, gaaawwly!* — the first time I entered a shopping mall with a roof.

Needless to say, some things are just lost on me. I enjoy the occasional spy-novel, and I'm currently about halfway through the latest Dan Silva

book chronicling the adventures of the legendary intelligence officer, Gabriel Allon (*The Collector*, Dan Silva). And similar to the archetype of the genre, Ian Flemming's James Bond, Silva regularly permeates his scenes with the kind of product placement that transports the reader into a world of sophistication and luxury.

Gabriel Allon doesn't just put on a watch, he straps a Patek Philippe timepiece to his wrist. His target didn't just jump on a bike, she rode a custom-made Pinarello, paid for through her theft of a million-dollar Richard Mille watch, a Harry Winston diamond bracelet, and a double strand of Mikimoto pearls. Gabriel's wife didn't wear a dress, she was draped in Versace, and he stood at her side in his custom-made Brioni tux (custom-made being an essential character trait in that world). At times the text reads like the ads at a Formula 1 race, brands that scream money and high society.

Included in this parade of products, we discover that authors never want their characters to go thirsty. James Bond is served a 1955 Chateau Mouton Rothschild. Gabriel Allon ends a travel day with a glass of the coveted Pomerol wine, Chateau Petrus, but to be honest, these images sail

right by me with no hint of recognition. I could no more discriminate the difference between a Burgundy and a Bordeaux than I could between the Olsen twins. I've acquired no frame of reference.

Donna and I have only attended one wine tasting in our lives and that was only because it was included with the hotel room at Biltmore. The gracious sommelier carefully lined out the samples before us, saying things like — *“You’ll note a hint of cassis ... a hint of saffron ... a hint of sweet tobacco* (apparently wine is big on hints). We’d sip and he would ask — *How does that compare to the Sauvignon?* — We’d exchange that glance that telegraphs without words — *I have no idea what he is talking about.* How did it compare? Is there supposed to be a difference?

It’s just not our thing, which comes as a major disappointment to the waitstaff stuck with us at any restaurant. They pull the wine list away as if we’ve insulted their mothers. *Well!*

We’re pretty sure that through the years our naive abstinence has diminished our prospects for friendship. We look pitifully homeless at happy hour, because we just don’t get what everybody’s talking about or even why they talk so much about it. So, there you have it, an ill-refined exemplar of

uncivilized cluelessness. I guess I came by it honestly, though. When my sister would ask my dad if he wanted a glass of wine, he'd say, "Just give me the pink stuff."

Looking back, I guess it wouldn't have hurt me to at least familiarize myself with the wine aisle at the Piggly Wiggly. After all, the witness of scripture is rife with vines, vineyards, vintners, grapes, wine, winepresses, and wineskins. Why, at the beginning of John's Gospel, you even find a wine critic. At a wedding in Cana, there's a party goin' on, and the wine cellar is approaching empty. So, Jesus gets busy turning water into wine to keep the party flowing. Only, when someone pops the cork on the new stuff, some self-appointed sommelier berates the bridegroom, "*Everyone serves the good wine first, and then the inferior wine after the guests have become drunk. But you have kept the good wine until now.*" Surprise, surprise, Jesus was more than a messiah, he was a master vintner.

In Genesis 9, after the flood, we're told Noah was the first to ferment wine, and consequently was among the first to get drunk and make a fool of himself. Jacob plied his blind, aging father, Isaac with wine as part of his plot to swindle Esau out of his rightful blessing. Later, when Jacob blesses

his own son, Judah, he says, *“Binding his foal to the vine and his donkey's colt to the choice vine, he washes his garments in wine and his robe in the blood of grapes; his eyes are darker than wine, and his teeth whiter than milk.”*

The Psalmist compares Israel to a grape vine when describing God's work among God's people — *“You brought a vine out of Egypt; you drove out the nations and planted it. You cleared the ground for it; it took deep root and filled the land. The mountains were covered with its shade, the mighty cedars with its branches; it sent out its branches to the sea, and its shoots to the River.”*

Isaiah uses the same imagery to lament Israel's self-destructive demise — *“Let me sing for my beloved my love-song concerning his vineyard: My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. He 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; he expected it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes.”*

The prophet Jeremiah is even more blunt in describing the same thing — *“Yet I planted you as a choice vine, from the purest stock. How then did you turn degenerate and become a wild vine?”*

The prophet Ezekiel employs the same imagery to describe the exile of God's people — *“Your mother was like a vine in a vineyard transplanted by the water, fruitful and full of branches from abundant water ... But it was plucked up in fury, cast down to the ground; the east wind dried it up; its fruit was stripped off, its strong stem was withered; the fire consumed it. Now it is transplanted into the wilderness, into a dry and thirsty land. And fire has gone out from its stem, has consumed its branches and fruit...”* Following this imagery through scripture, eventually the object identifies the subject without even having to name it.

Identification through imagery. When I mention The Splendid Splinter, do you know of whom I am speaking? (Ted Williams). What about the Sultan of Swat? (Babe Ruth). The Logo? (Jerry West) The Big Dipper? (Wilt Chamberlain). Fräulein Forehand? (Steffi Graf). The Black Mamba (Kobe Bryant). When noted individuals become attached to images, the images become an extension of their identity. In the case of Magic or Tiger, the image eclipses the actual name. If I stood up here and just mentioned Earvin and Eldrick, no one would know to whom I was referring. Vineyards and vintners, vines and grapes — for centuries prophets and poets attached these images to the relationship between God and God's people. So, when

Jesus shows up and uses the imagery of vineyards, vines, and grapes, his audience certainly knows to what and to whom he is referring.

When Jesus offered a parable beginning with the words — *“A man planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a pit for the wine press, and built a watchtower; then he leased it to tenants”* — Jesus’ audience knew exactly about whom Jesus was speaking. Similarly, when Jesus said — *“You will know them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles?”* — his listeners knew Jesus wasn’t offering a lecture on viticulture. He was talking about them, just as John the Baptist was when he said — *“Bear fruit worthy of repentance ... every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”* And it was no leap of logic for Jesus’ listeners to comprehend that he wasn’t alluding to production schedules when he said — *“But as for that in the good soil, these are the ones who, when they hear the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patient endurance.”*

Listen, my understanding of viticulture may be limited to a preference of Welch’s over the generic store brand — *Food Club? How gauche!* — but even I can catch the drift of what Jesus is saying to us and about us out here

in the vineyard. The wine you sip from the glass is the product of a complicated, fragile, volatile web of relationship that requires consistent and intensive oversight and nurture. The good vintners are meticulous about it. There is a reason folks laugh about TJ Swan and swoon over Bollinger. Attention to detail.

So many things have to come together at the right time and with the right balance. Tannins, baume, Botrytis cinerea, yeast strain, fining, pip, punt, maturation, malolactic fermentation, loam, silt, moisture content, weather forecasts, Chardonnay, Alicante Bouschet, Godello. The number of details to which a vintner must pay attention is no less daunting than the hundreds of gauges and buttons lighting up the cockpit of an F-35. Add to that the stress of living with the knowledge that one seemingly innocuous variation from the norm can have calamitous consequences. Such is the nature of life as we know it, and so the question of who is watching over, who is holding together, who is nurturing this precarious and delicate endeavor becomes paramount.

Jesus said — *“I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit*



*he prunes to make it bear more fruit ... Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches.*

Let's bring this image home, shall we? Using imagery his audience understands, Jesus is emphatically stating that neither life nor faith can be understood as a solitary or individual endeavor. The modern mind is wont to scoff at or diminish what we are about here, assuming we are pointlessly clinging to some ancient fables that bear no relevance in an entrepreneurial age which finds its meaning in individual achievement. Why be a disciple when you can be an influencer? How do stories from 2 to 3 millennia ago get me to the place where my subscribers and followers prompt the advertisers to pay me to be ME! Does it do anything for my resume? Why waste my time with something I cannot monetize?

Yeah, well, good luck with all that. From voices as unique as Benjamin Franklin and William Sloane Coffin we have heard it said that there is no smaller package in all the world than that of a person all wrapped up in theirself. To the pridefully self-sovereign individualists who glibly dismiss our quaint religious rites, let me name the actual myth deluding societies

today ... independence, autonomy, self-sufficiency. We are no more independent than the flame is from the fire.

Folks my age learn that reality in sobering ways. That same hand you grabbed for security when crossing the road as a preschooler, you now hold onto to keep them from falling or to guide them through the basic life tasks they no longer remember how to perform. The parent becomes the child and the child becomes the parent, and neither would have survived to this point without the other.

In China, officials estimate that 53 million of their citizens have some form of cognitive impairment. By mid-century China will have more than 500 million people over the age of 60. There is growing concern over how they will meet the needs for caregiving on such a massive scale. Life is a complicated web of dependencies. *(The Economist)*

When the bridge collapsed in Baltimore Harbor a month ago, the consequences spread out like electrical current through the power grid. This vast web of impact touched dockworkers, commuters, suppliers, manufacturers, small businesses, city budgets, the state's economic forecast, international trade, little leagues, delis, diners, and visits to aunt Martha.

We didn't need Intel to inform us we are part of a world-wide web. Survival depends on the understanding that there is no such thing as a self-made person, no life without the mutual dependencies that make it possible for us to do anything from breathing to scoring the winning touchdown in the Super Bowl.

We are connected. Lorenz knew that, didn't he. Do you remember the famous image offered by the noted climatologist? The fluttering of a butterfly's wings in Shanghai can have an influence on the scale and direction of the tornado in Kansas.

We are connected, and whether it was the Psalmist, Isaiah, Hosea, Jesus, or Paul, the scriptures convey that life is all about connections. The sooner we accept that, and understand who alone is suited to maintain those connections, the closer we will be to the peace that passes all understanding. That's why we're here. That's the truth that sustains us. That's the truth that shields us and saves us from society's myth of independence. *"I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower ... Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it*

*abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches.”*

And lest we are at a loss as to what fruit we as a community are intended to produce, Paul removes all doubt — *“the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.”*

Listen, on the inevitable next occasion when someone imperiously enlightens me with a discourse on the astringency caused by too much tannin in the Malbec, I’m pretty sure my eyes are going to glaze right over, but nevertheless, whenever I say, “After supper Christ took a cup of wine and he said, this is my blood shed for you,” I will know he is talking about us, about the church, about our connection, our mutual dependency, our shared hope and salvation, and our shared calling to bear the fruit of the Spirit. *“Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you or I unless we abide together in the Lord.”* Amen.