

## Reflection & Prayertime 10-4-20

### The Shape That I'm In: Rebuilding the Vineyard

Isaiah 5:1-7:

I will sing for the one I love, a song about his vineyard: My loved one had a vineyard on a fertile hillside.

2 He dug it up and cleared it of stones and planted it with the choicest vines. He built a watchtower in it and cut out a winepress as well. Then he looked for a crop of good grapes, but it yielded only bad fruit.<sup>3</sup> “Now you dwellers in Jerusalem and people of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard.

4 What more could have been done for my vineyard than I have done for it? When I looked for good grapes, why did it yield only bad?

5 Now I will tell you what I am going to do to my vineyard; I will take away its hedge, and it will be destroyed;

I will break down its wall, and it will be trampled.

6 I will make it a wasteland, neither pruned nor cultivated, and briers and thorns will grow there. I will command the clouds not to rain on it.

7 The vineyard of the Lord Almighty is the nation of Israel, and the people of Judah are the vines he delighted in. And he looked for justice, but saw bloodshed; for righteousness, but heard cries of distress.

Listening to my kids' music has been one of my pandemic anchors and I particularly like a song that my daughter Sarah wrote about accumulating life lessons and whether we really see each other – truly see the shape that we're in.

A woman named Caelie Chapman who lives in California posted the following on her facebook page earlier this year: I've had this beautiful succulent for about 2 years now. I was so proud of this plant. It was full, beautiful coloring, just an over all perfect plant. I had it up in my kitchen window. I had a watering plan for it, if someone else tried to water my succulent I would get so defensive because I just wanted to keep good care of it. I absolutely loved my succulent. Today I decided it was time to transplant, I found the cutest vase, that suited it perfectly. I go to pull it from the original plastic container it was purchased with to learn this plant was FAKE. I put so much love into this plant! I washed its leaves. Tried my hardest to keep it looking it's best, and it's completely plastic! How did I not know this. I pull it from the container it's sitting on Styrofoam with sand glued to the top! I feel like these last two years have been a lie. I shared this story with a coworker who admitted that the same thing had happened to her, that she just couldn't see it until she dug down deep.

In Chris Gardner's book, *The Pursuit of Happyness*, Gardner details his struggle as a black homeless man with a young son trying to stay afloat as he completes an internship at a stock brokerage firm in the 1980's. He writes “By this time period, San Francisco's conflicting attitudes toward a growing homeless population were already known. What officials declared was a new epidemic in homelessness had actually been developing for more than a decade as the result of several factors – including drastic cutbacks to state funding for mental health facilities, limited treatment options for the large number of Vietnam vets suffering from post-traumatic stress syndrome and alcohol and drug addiction, along with the same urban ills plaguing the rest of the country. As government programs to help the poor were being eliminated, the economy was in a downturn. Maybe you noticed some of the signs – the long food lines, multiplying numbers of panhandlers, the mothers and children on the steps of overcapacity shelters, runaway teenagers, or those sleeping human forms that sometimes looked

more like mounds of discarded clothing left in alleys, on park benches, at transit stations, and under the eaves and in the doorways of buildings. Maybe your visit to San Francisco reminded you of similar problems in your hometown or maybe even alerted you to the increasing percentage of the working poor who'd entered the ranks of the homeless – gainfully employed but overburdened individuals and families forced to choose between paying rent and buying food, medicine, clothing or other basic necessities. You may have paused to wonder what kinds of lives and dreams and stories had been lived before, and perhaps to consider how easy it would be for anyone to fall through the cracks of whatever support had once existed, or to face a sudden crisis of any proportion and suddenly stumble into the hole of homelessness.

Chances are, however, no matter how observant you might have been, you wouldn't have noticed me. Of if you did happen to spot me, usually moving at a fast clip as I pushed a lightweight, rickety blue stroller that had become my only wheels and that carried my most precious cargo in the universe – my 19 month old son, Chris Jr, a beautiful, growing, active, alert, talkative, hungry toddler – it's unlikely you would have suspected that my baby and I were homeless. Dressed in one of my two business suits, the other in the garment bag that was slung over my shoulder, along with the duffel bag that was filled with all our other earthly possessions...as I tried to hold an umbrella in one hand, a briefcase in another, and balance the world's largest box of Pampers under my armpit, still while maneuvering the stroller, we probably looked like we were going off on a long weekend somewhere. “

Gardner and his son slept on the BART subway train, the floor under his desk (and his work ethic was praised, as he was the first one there and the last one to “leave” - no one seemed able to see that he was living at work). He wrote “the one advantage to the BART station bathroom what that nobody else apparently thought of it, so there was no line to get in. One evening Chris was 10 minutes late to the shelter check in and was told they were full so he tells Chris Jr they are going to look at the airplanes at the Oakland airport where they can look like they are travelers and he takes him to a bathroom at a BART station where they can lock the door, wash up and sleep on the floor. He tells Chris Jr they are going to play a game called Shhh, where no matter how loud or long someone knocks on the door, the object is to not say a word, no matter what.

Chris described his feelings at the time: “my feet hurt, my body ached. A darkness began to seep into my days, not just outside in the weather but in my head. At the office, no, that was where the sun was shining, where the brightness of my potential buoyed my spirits, where the crops I had been planting were starting to bud all over the place. But the second I left work my spirits dipped – because always in the back of my mind I knew that if the bus ran late, or if Christopher wasn't zipped into his cold-weather clothes fast enough, or if we got to the shelter late, or if I didn't have time to pick something up to eat before we went up to the room and locked ourselves in, I had to come up with a plan B right away. Having to compartmentalize and organize all our stuff to keep it contained, like in the military, was beating me down. Everything had to be rolled up and ready to go at a moment's notice, everything had to be able to be located at all times, what you needed when you needed it – a sock, a Pamper, a shirt, a toothbrush, Christopher's clothes, a hairbrush, a book that someone left on the train I was reading, a favorite toy. It started getting heavy, all that I was carrying and the weight of the stress and fear. When they did access housing, Chris Jr couldn't seem to understand that they didn't have to carrying everything they owned– it was foreign to him.

One of our board members here at Volunteers of America Mid-States is named Tawanda Chitapa and he's written on his facebook page: I was born in Zimbabwe, to a Shona family and I am proud of my heritage. However, I was also raised among the Ndebele people in Bulawayo, and I am equally proud of my upbringing amongst the Ndebele people. The most popular greeting in the Ndebele language is

Sakubona, which literally means “we see you.” Sakubona is equivalent to Hello and Namaste. Roche Mamabolo explains it best: “we meet, I would say “sakubona” [we see you], and you respond by saying “yebo, sakubona” [yes, we see you too]. Why do we say “We” see you even when it is just me a single individual person greeting you? And why do you respond by the same when it is just you a single individual person greeting me? In Ndebele tradition, the “I” is connection to an ancient lineage of ancestors which my ancestors are always with me. So when I meet you, not only is myself meeting you, but my ancestors whom I’m representing meet you too. So sakubona [we see you] means me and my ancestors see you, and your response means you and your ancestors see me too.” Sakubona is about allowing one’s self to see and acknowledge the other’s whole being; accept and honor their history, discover their current needs, see their fears, identify their strengths and flaws, and most of all accepting others for what they are and where they come from. And joining together in creating a better world for all.

In the Scripture I read the “beloved,” the owner of the vineyard is God and the vineyard is Israel and that image is sometimes associated with the image of bride with her beloved. Only now it is deeply ironic given the breakdown in Israel's relationship with God. The love-song imagery sets up the audience to hear words of love, but words of judgment soon fill the room. Terence Freitheim says that such a turn would be like singing “Holy, Holy, Holy” to the tune of “Let Me Call You Sweetheart.”

The beginning of the text is positive – the vines are a high quality product. Israel is chosen by the beloved, with a high value as human beings and the land is fertile and the relationship between the owner and vineyard is good.

As with all farmers, God waits expectantly and patiently for the development and the building of a watchtower, hedge, and wall shows the owner's investment in the safety of the vineyard. The owner has high expectations and carries the sense of eager anticipation for the great harvest.

Yet the vines yield wild grapes, spoiled fruit, unfit for making good wine. In spite of the best divine efforts and expectations, things go wrong, and in view of these developments, God directly engages the vineyard, hoping the people will discern what they have done and judge, that is pronounce a verdict against themselves. God asks why did this happen, essentially a divine lament.

At this point the vine is useless if unable to produce and it should be destroyed along with its protective infrastructure (the watchtower, the hedge the wall); a destruction will follow that will serve as a refining fire through which Israel must pass to enable a positive future. The issue for God has become clear – an absence of justice toward the disadvantaged members of Israel's society and a vacuum of righteousness that neglects the word and deed of God in their treatment of others. The “bloodshed” refers to abusive practices that bleed the poor to death and the cry refers to their anguished response. These actions are the wild grapes.

Rev Dr. Ron Bell wrote in his essay, Do Not Look Away, “My city is burning but not in the way the media is showing. Did you see the fire, not the one burning down the precinct, but the one burning in the hearts of the wounded in my community? The grieving mothers and grandmothers recalling the voice of our dear brother George Floyd, as he called for his mother, while taking his last breath. The burning of the hearts of we who wept, when our governmental leaders refused to arrest the murderer of this wicked and inhumane deed. Did you see that fire?

Did you see the shattered glass, not those easily replaceable windows scattered in pieces on the ground

under our feet? Instead the shattered glass of expectation for justice, the shattered glass of respect for our humanity that our murderers continue to display, the shattered glass of hope as we watched our brother's body lay, lifeless under the knee of his murderer. Did you see that glass shatter?

You must have witnessed the looting? Not ones the cameras and social media love to exploit, but instead the looting of our human rights. The looting of our constitutional rights as citizens. The loot of our communities for decades by corporations for greed. Did you see that looting?

I think you were so busy looking for a riot that you missed the gathering of the grieving. I think you were so busy looking for looters that you missed the lament and heartbreak of a community. I think you were so busy looking for trouble that you missed the tragedy of systemic racialized trauma on the body of black and brown people. Tonight, tomorrow, and even the next day I beg of you, look again. Look again.”

The vineyard is rebuilt when we hear the authentic lament, and we rebuild, as individuals and as structures. I'm proud to be involved with this organization that not only supports people rebuilding their lives but rebuilds societal structures. For all of it, thanks be to God.