



**“A Love Song?”**  
**Sermon Preached by Gregory Knox Jones**  
**September 26, 2010**  
**Isaiah 5:1-7**

A middle-aged man has been a model employee for 25 years. He puts in extra hours, he keeps up with the latest technology and he has sharpened his interpersonal skills. He considers himself a valuable employee, integral to the success of the business. A high level position opens up that he has dreamt of having, and he puts in for a promotion. But soon the word begins to spread. The boss has given the job to a younger man. Do you know what it is to have your hopes dashed?

Linn and her husband have celebrated more than a dozen years of marriage. They have two children who are bright, well-behaved and responsible. Linn feels fortunate to be living her dream of a close-knit, loving family. She calls her pastor in tears. Her husband says he is in love with someone else and wants a divorce. Do you know what it is to have your hopes dashed?

A couple gave their son every opportunity they could afford. They put him in good schools, they raised him in the church, they expressed their love for him and they modeled positive values. Near the end of college, he dropped out, began taking drugs and had run-ins with the law. Do you know what it is to have your hopes dashed?

If you know the anguish of unrealized expectations, then you have an idea of how God feels when people of faith turn out to be a great disappointment. This morning’s passage from the Book of Isaiah is called a love song, but it certainly is not a typical ballad expressing affection for another. The prophet sings a few endearing verses to warm our emotions, but just when our hearts begin to soften, his song turns sour. Chaos is coming.

The song tells of a gardener who has planted a vineyard on a fertile hill. With caring hands, the gardener has hoed the soil, pulled the weeds, cleared out the rocks and planted choice vines. The gardener has placed a protective hedge around it and has built a watchtower in the midst of it. After providing such marvelous care for the vineyard, it is reasonable that the gardener would expect lush, delicious grapes. But those expectations are thwarted. Rather than sweet grapes, the vineyard yields bitter ones.

In case his audience does not understand his song, Isaiah explains in the final verse that the vineyard is a metaphor for the community of faith and the gardener is God. God has cared for the people and shown them how to prosper, and in return, God expects right living and justice. But what the community of faith produces is something very different. Injustice flourishes and it ignites God’s anger. There will be heavy consequences for their rebellion. The vineyard will be trampled and laid to waste.

We prefer to skip over the Old Testament passages that speak of God's wrath because we know God is loving and anger appears to be the opposite of love. But is it not God's love that is the very basis of God's outrage? God loves the whole human family and when some are mistreated, God is provoked. If we read further in Isaiah, we discover that those with wealth and power are taking advantage of the vulnerable, and that's what touches off God's fury.

Fred Craddock remembers working his way through college years ago. One summer, he had a job in a box factory where he hammered nails to make vegetable crates. He worked beside another man in a production line. The two handled the same crates, drove the same size nails, did the same work and put in the same hours. At the end of their first week, they received their paychecks. They were proud of them, but when they looked at one another's checks Craddock noticed that his check was for fifteen dollars more than the other man's check.

He said to his co-worker, "Oops, looks like there has been a clerical mistake. Someone in the office probably did some bad typing. Let's go get it straightened out." They went to the office and said, "These checks aren't the same. We worked the same number of hours, so they ought to be identical." Craddock said, "I believe he's been shorted."

Well, there was some growling around and going into the back room, and then they finally came out with a new check for the other man that was the same amount as Craddock's. Before he left that day, Craddock said the boss pulled him aside and said, "We didn't know he could read." Since he could not read, they decided they could take advantage of him.<sup>1</sup>

God urges us to recognize that we do not exist as isolated individuals. We are our brother's keeper. And more than that, we are our brother's brother/our sister's sister. We are part of a global family that exists as a complex web of interdependence. What I do matters not only to me, but also to you, because what we do impacts one another. God expects us to see to it that our sisters and brothers have full stomachs and decent housing, uncontaminated water and opportunities for education, safe neighborhoods and adequate health care, equal justice and full respect.

Each person is a child of God, so when we extend love to one another, it is a concrete way of expressing our love for our Creator. That also means that contempt for a fellow child of God is contempt for our Creator.

Bishop Desmond Tutu says, "If each person is created in God's image, it means that oppression and injustice are not merely evil, which they are; and not just painful, which they frequently will be for the victim, it means they are blasphemous! It is like spitting in the face of God."<sup>2</sup>

God wants all people to be moral and I believe that from the moment we are born, God's Spirit influences us in subtle, unconscious ways. God's spiritual energy urges us to be loving and just. That's why nearly all people – religious or not – have a built in sense of fairness from an early age. It's why we experience such satisfaction when we are compassionate to others or do something to further the cause of justice. We know in our soul that it is the right thing to do.

It's not enough to call ourselves Christian and belong to a church. It's not enough to simply hold certain beliefs about Jesus. Because God is concerned not simply with what we think, but how we live, how we treat each other and especially how we treat the most vulnerable. Can you really call yourself a Christian if you hold prejudices or you are violent toward another? Can you call yourself a Christian if you are greedy or indifferent to suffering? Can you call yourself a Christian if you do nothing to care for God's creation or to feed people who are hungry or to comfort people who grieve? Does not being a Christian entail following the way of Christ?

Not one of us is perfect. All of us have times when we head down the crooked trail. But God gives us opportunities to get back on the right path – where we follow Christ by extending compassion to people who are neglected, by working for justice for people who are treated unfairly and by championing the cause of peace.

What excites me about our church family is that we have so many people who put their faith into action. Many of you make a special effort to make Westminster the most hospitable community of faith we can be. I have seen you go out of your way to make people feel welcome, regardless of their race, sexual orientation or economic status. Many of you have gone on mission trips to New Orleans to help people rebuild their community. A good number of you pound nails with Habitat for Humanity to provide affordable housing locally. Dozens of you have been involved in Family Promise, feeding and housing homeless families right here in our building. Some of you serve as mentors to children who are at-risk of falling behind their peers. I can't begin to count how many of you help with one of our feeding ministries. Several of you serve as F.I.S.H. volunteers, driving people to medical appointments. Some of you work on peace and justice initiatives with Churches for Middle East Peace or Pacem in Terris. As a congregation, we have contributed to building dormitories for more than 40 AIDS orphans in Kenya, and we have developed partnerships with churches in Guatemala and Congo. Through our support of Faith Center, we help the working poor in our community who are struggling financially. Many of you are Stephen Ministers or Caring Friends who have helped others through difficult life crises. Twenty of you are meeting regularly with local Muslims to break down stereotypes and build bridges of understanding. Your active engagement in these ministries is a sign that we are responding faithfully to God's command that we extend mercy and work for justice.

One of the prominent hospitals in Atlanta is Grady Memorial Hospital and it is an interesting piece of architecture. It was built in the shape of an "H." That's handy, "H" for hospital. Helicopters rushing in patients can look for the large "H." Tom Long says that old-time Atlantans do not call it Grady Hospital, they call it "The Gradys." They call it "The Gradys" because it was built in the era of segregation. One side of the "H" was for whites and one side was for blacks. However, there is a corridor connecting them because the architect sensed that things would not always remain separate and unequal.<sup>3</sup> The architect believed that one day people of different races would live together and work together and receive the same care. After many struggles, it came to pass.

God is passionate about justice. If God were indifferent, God would support the status quo and side with those in power, whether they were virtuous or tyrants. Yet, throughout the Old and New Testaments, God sides not with the powerful, but with the vulnerable, and calls on us to create communities where "justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream." (Amos 5:24)

We have a tendency to want to make friends with people in positions of power. But if you want to get closer to God, you will get to know victims of injustice. Because that's where God is and where God wants us to be.

## NOTES

1. Fred Craddock, "Something to Remember," *Relationships: Christian Self-Regard*, series 2, cassette tape 3.
2. Bishop Desmond Tutu, untitled sermon at the Festival of Homiletics in Atlanta, May, 2009.

3. Tom Long, “Investment Strategies for Unrighteous Mammon: Preaching about Money from the Gospel of Luke” at the Festival of Homiletics in Atlanta, May 2009.