One aspect of being clergy is that people give you stuff to read, be it an article, a book, something they saw on the internet or a pamphlet a guy handed them at the airport. Sometimes this stuff is good and interesting while other times it is neither good nor interesting. I once had a parishioner give me a book about the passage from Isaiah that we have today. This book argued that this passage was really about September 11th, Osama bin Laden, the Illuminati and whoever it was that came up with the Teletubbies theme song. I don’t really remember a lot about the book but it talked a lot about hedges and it concerned itself with big sweeping events and not individuals. And I think that is a pity because when we make our focus too broad, we can miss what God might actually be saying to us.

The quick version of the passage from Isaiah is that we have an image of God creating a wonderful vineyard, a place that should yield wonderful results, but something goes wrong. Instead of a great harvest of grapes there are instead only wild grapes. And as a result of this God essentially says that he is not going to put any more effort into the vineyard but let nature take its course. There are really three acts to this story – God builds, we disobey and then God abandons. The book my former parishioner gave me focused on the third part. It essentially said that things were bad in the United States so we must be at the point where God had abandoned us. And while you can always find evidence of bad things happening, I am not really sure what that does for us. What I mean by that is if we sit around and say that God has abandoned us there is not much to do. Rather, I think the focus should be about what God has done and will do and our responsibilities in that covenant.

Isaiah sets the scene this way saying, “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.” Now I might have added some drip irrigation but, overall, we get the picture of a very thoughtful and thorough farmer. He has given the grapes everything it is that they need to succeed and now it is up to the grapes. And this is the moment where we come into the story and so we need to ask how can we be the good grapes?

I don’t like to beat metaphors into the ground but I want to keep going with this one for just a minute. The problem in this story is not the growth but rather the type of growth. For as it says, “he expected it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes.” Yes, something grew, but it was not what was wanted nor was it good. And that really is the message to us. God has given us this beautiful earth; he has blessed us with people who love us and forgiven us through his Son Jesus Christ. And while certainly there are things that are wrong with this earth, just like there might not be enough rain one year in the vineyard, but on balance God has given us everything that we need to grow good fruit. And so, I think the key takeaway from this passage is not trying to figure out whose hedge has been cut down but rather if we are acting like the right kind of grapes? Are we taking advantage of the vineyard that God has prepared for us to grow in our love for God or are we using it to do our own thing?

When St. Augustine set out to describe evil, he came up with the definition of it being a privation of the good. What he meant by this was that evil had not substance in and of itself rather it only existed by destroying something that was good. What this means in practicality is that you can’t have a bucketful of evil rather what you can have is the evil action which destroys something that is good – something like murder or slander. In this understanding things are evil only in the ways that they are used in relation to something that is good. So, let’s say that I have a hammer and I hammered all over this land. Now if I used my hammer to build homes for disadvantaged individuals you would say the hammer was used for good. Now let’s say that instead like Maxwell and his silver hammer I bring this hammer down on Joan’s head and I make sure that she is dead. The hammer is the same but in one instance it is used to further God’s kingdom and in the other it is used to destroy God’s good creation. This is also important to keep in mind when we are thinking about our life in God’s vineyard, how are we using it?

Now and then I come across someone who has rejected Christianity and when they explain why I often find that they have rejected a version of Christianity that I don’t really recognize as being particularly Christian. And I think one of those versions can come out of this story. The version that I am talking about was apparent in the book my parishioner gave me. It basically posited that we did something wrong and so now God is going to make sure that all sorts of terrible things happen to us. But is that really the case? If we think of it in the context of this story, the reason the hedge is removed and things are not pruned or maintained it is because bad grapes are being grown. But this is not punishment. If God kept the hedge in place and continued to look after the vineyard he would be aiding and abetting us in our pursuit of evil. The neglect of the vineyard is God saying that he cannot be a part of what it is we are using his good creation for. The story is telling us what happens when we do not participate in God’s good plan. And what happens is God backs off because he is not the author of evil. Think about it like this. Those of us who are parents want to help and support our children in their lives. So, if they have a big test, we are happy to help them study. When they move out, we are happy to help them set up their first apartment and so on. But let’s say our kid wants us to loan them some money so that they can bring in a shipment of Chinese fentanyl from Chicago to sell on the streets of Dousman. Hopefully, we would say no because this is not the type of thing our child should be doing. And although it sounds harsh, we would hope that they failed in their new venture and would probably do as much as we could to stop them from becoming a leader of a drug cartel. We do this because we want what is best for them and we know that our helping them in pursuit of their dream of leading a Lake Country drug cartel would put them in a very bad place, not to mention the damage their Chinese fentanyl could do to the rest of society. Just as God tries to set us up for success, we do the same for our kids but that help stops when it is going to do damage. That is not punishment but rather it is love. Illustrations like we have from Isaiah today tell us both about God and about how we are supposed to act with the gifts that God has given us. God is very giving, but in return he asks something of us. May we bear good fruit this day and forevermore.