

The Fruits of the Kingdom

Isaiah 5:1-7; Matthew 21:33-46

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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Over the last few weeks, blogger Richard Beck has been running a series of posts under the heading “The Teleological Gaze.”

“Teleological” is probably a word that is unfamiliar to some so I should probably unpack it a bit.

The Greek word *telos* literally means "end." A telos refers to an ultimate object, goal or aim—the end you are pursuing or heading toward.

So, teleology is the explanation of something in terms of the purpose it serves rather than of the causes by which it arises.

You could describe a pair of glasses as the end result of a bunch of causes—there is plastic that is shaped into arms that fit over the ears, there’s a glass lens with a certain curvature, there’s a lens that must be ground into the correct shape to fit into the plastic. These are the causes by which a pair of glasses come into existence.

But if you wanted to describe the glasses teleologically, you would have to describe them according to the purpose that they are intended to serve. Glasses are made to help people see. That’s their *telos*, their aim, their end goal.

Or, take a smartphone. A causal explanation of a smartphone would include descriptions of the plastic, iron, aluminum, and copper that go into them, the SIM card, the camera, the technology that allows you to access the Internet, and the process by which these are all assembled.

But a teleological description would focus on the purpose they smartphones are intended to serve. The *telos* of a smartphone is communication and connection.

(Or, the enslavement of vast swaths of the human race to their devices so that their data can be harvested and sold to massive corporations who can then manipulate them through targeted advertising thus hastening the end of democracy and Western civilization. Depending on your perspective. 😊)

Anyway, Beck's series on "The Teleological Gaze" is based on the conviction that,

[O]ne of the primary ways religious belief helps us is how it provides us with a teleological perspective and framework when thinking about life.¹

We understand our lives in terms of *purpose*. We imagine ourselves to be vessels of meaning in a broader story that is going somewhere, that has meaning and intention, that is being led toward a hopeful future.

We are not satisfied to think of ourselves as simply a collection of molecules in random motion. We are so much more than this.

The Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard is said to have remarked that science can tell us everything about human beings except "what it is to be born, to live, or to die."

That's a lot to leave out, if you ask me.

We are teleological beings, through and through. We don't seem to be able to thrive or even survive without some kind of goal or end by which to understand and orient our lives.

Our texts today are profoundly teleological in nature.

Isaiah sings of a landowner who planted a vineyard. He found a fertile hill, cleared all the stones away, planted it with the best vines, built a watchtower to protect it. He did everything he could to ensure a flourishing vineyard and a bountiful crop.

Naomi and I had the opportunity to do a few wine tastings in a summer trip to the Okanagan. We got a firsthand look at how much goes into producing the right kinds of grapes. You need

¹ <http://experimentaltheology.blogspot.com/2020/09/the-teleological-gaze-part-1-definitions.html>

the right soil, the right amount and intensity of sunshine. Different grapes respond differently in even slightly modified conditions!

I thought of our experience this summer as I prepared for this sermon.

The *telos* of all the labour and science and experimentation in the vineyard we visited is the same as it was in Isaiah's song. Good grapes that can make good wine. That's the purpose. That's the end, the goal, the aim of it all.

And yet, in Isaiah's song, the vineyard did not yield the fruit that God wanted. It yielded "wild grapes" instead of sweet ones.

And so, Isaiah says, the vineyard will be destroyed.

Isaiah's song is, of course, a metaphor. God had expected justice and righteousness from his people, but he got disobedience and idolatry, and bloodshed.

And the people of Israel in Isaiah's day would be "laid waste." They would be conquered and taken into exile where they would suffer under a long string of foreign occupiers that included Babylon, Assyria, Persia, and eventually Rome.

In Matthew, Jesus borrows Isaiah's framework, but takes the story in a bit of a different direction.

In Jesus' parable, the landowner (God) leaves the vineyard and entrusts it to tenants.

But when harvest time comes and the landowner sends messengers to collect the produce, the tenants beat and killed them. He sends more, and they receive the same treatment.

Finally, he sends his son. The tenants decide to kill the son and get his inheritance.

The parable has taken a dark turn from the original story in Isaiah. Not only is the vineyard failing to produce fruit, its tenants are now rejecting the landowner and his messengers.

Jesus is telling a story about himself—about his role, about his authority, and about his ultimate fate.

In this parable, Jesus is pointing a finger directly at the religious leaders of Israel who are questioning his authority. It is clear that he sees the Jewish leaders as the caretakers of the vineyard, which is Israel.

As in Isaiah's time, the Jewish leaders had been trying to understand and protect and preserve Israel's identity in light of exile and the domination of foreign empires.

And so, they did what people and groups nearly always do when they feel afraid or under threat.

They drew tighter boundaries, enforced stricter rules, centralized power, emphasized severity and judgment at the expense of mercy and compassion. Some resorted to violent uprisings against their occupiers and accused all who wouldn't join them of being unfaithful.

And they drifted further and further from their *telos*—their reason for being.

Jesus was a threat to these religious leaders and all that they had built. They were afraid of this strange prophet who healed and performed miracles and reinterpreted the law on his own authority.

This is what drove them to hoard their place in the vineyard and to seek the inheritance all for themselves.

The tenants allowed their religion to grow toxic. They forgot that the purpose of a vineyard is to produce fruit.

The point is still fruit. It has always been fruit.

Ever since God planted his people in a garden and said, "Be fruitful and multiply," the *telos* has been fruit. The original task was to steward the good creation that God had brought into being.

Over time, with the introduction of sin, the human vocation is extended to include the fruit of justice and right relatedness to God and neighbour.

Jesus interprets his own parable in verse 43 as being all about fruit:

"Therefore, I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produce the fruits of the kingdom."

Today is World Communion Sunday where we celebrate being part of a global body.

The worldwide church, scattered around the globe, is the result of Jesus' invitation to all people. The family of faith now goes far beyond the boundaries of ethnicity or law or tribalism and extends to anyone and everyone who bears the fruit of the kingdom.

What is this fruit?

Well, in Matthew's gospel, Jesus has been showing and teaching about this fruit for almost the entire twenty chapters prior to this. The fruit of the kingdom is described most clearly in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7). This is what a life guided by the *telos* of the kingdom of God looks like.

Or, more succinctly, it looks like the love of God and love of neighbour. This sums up the entire law, as Jesus tells the Pharisees a few verses after our gospel reading, when they attempt to test him about his knowledge of the law.

Or, we could look to the fruit of the Spirit from Paul's letter to the Galatians (Gal. 5:22-23). Love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.

Could there be more necessary fruit for the church to produce amidst times as conflicted, chaotic, and polarizing as 2020 has been?

These stories about unfruitful vineyards are not meant to lead us to just wag our fingers at those stubborn, hardhearted religious leaders of Israel.

They're not an invitation for us to condemn whoever we imagine would occupy those categories today, whether corrupt evangelical mega-pastors or abusive priests or holier-than-thou social justice warriors.

Jesus' parables are always first a challenge to look inward.

We must never forget that we are to be about producing the fruit of the kingdom. That's what we're for. That's our *telos*.

But moving beyond the call to the church to *bear* fruit, today we are reminded that the worldwide church is *itself* the fruit of the very event the parable refers to metaphorically.

The “landowner’s son” would be killed, of course, only a few days after he told this parable. He would be nailed to a Roman cross as a result of fear, anger, hardheartedness and rejection by the very ones who should have welcomed him.

But the death of the landowner’s son is the punishment that brought us peace. By his wounds, we are healed and cleansed, our sins are forgiven, and we are offered the gift of new life.

By this death—and resurrection three days later—the doors to the kingdom are flung wide open to all.

This is what we will be remembering and celebrating in a few moments at the table.

There was a landowner who planted a vineyard... He cleared it, planted the choicest of vines, set a watchtower over it, and looked forward to good fruit...

The next move is ours.

May God help his church—here and around the world—to produce the fruits of the kingdom.

Amen.

