

How many of you have watched some of the Olympics?  
Cheered or yelled out loud? It's about the only time I talk to the TV.  
It's the only time I want to root for the U.S.A. to be better than every other nation or team in the world.  
It's the only time I really care about sports; I think because the Olympics is so much more than sports.  
It's about humans working unbelievably hard to accomplish something no one else can. It's about the world coming together and celebrating and competing together and amazing ourselves and the rest of the world with what we are capable of. Sadly, it's also about economy, income for the host cities and sponsors, sometimes at the expense of the poor who get further displacement. It's about waste and pomp and circumstance and perhaps showing off the worst of what we are capable of.

It makes me wish that we would work as hard for things like fighting poverty, disease, and hunger; being peacemakers; universal healthcare; being a world community; caring less about our material gain and consumption, and more about seeing that those with little or none receive what they need to thrive. If only more millionaires and billionaires and yes, ordinary folks like us, would compete to see who could benefit others the most. As we just sang, if only all of our eyes, and ears, and hearts, and mouths would be opened to ways we can love and show god's love. If only.

If only we could be like Paul and run this race we call our faith life, faithfully, giving 100% to strengthening it, pushing and challenging ourselves to do the hard work it takes. If only we could remember that our eternal reward will be so much more satisfying than a gold medallion or a headline in the news. If only.

Paul's letter to the Colossians points out to the church there just how easy it is to get sucked in to what he calls hollow or deceptive philosophies and how they take us captive. Some would say capitalism is one of those. Some would say religion is.

Paul cautions against human traditions and principles of this world.

What might he mean by that in today's world? One example from the Olympics might be the bias that still exists between male and female athletics. Media still identifies females as compared to males' capabilities; and other subtle and not so subtle remarks that ignore the females' personhood. I leave you to consider other things that fall into these categories for you personally.

Over all, the Olympics coverage has been a refreshing break from our political ads and so called news coverage, another area that the media is so biased I'm quite sure no one but God alone still knows the truth. It is, in fact, our raging political fiasco that drew me to our Isaiah scripture this morning.

In some bible versions this passage is captioned 'a song of the vineyard' it is written in the style of a love poem or letter.

In Eugene Peterson's The Message it is titled 'looking for a crop of justice' I'd like to read that version for you.

Isaiah is speaking to Israel/Judah, the split nation of God's chosen people.

In the first section he is talking about God, as his beloved.

God planted a vineyard. Everyone listening would know the extreme importance of a vineyard. The fruit was essential for eating as well as drinking all year round.

Preparing for, planting and tending a vineyard is very hard work. There is not instant gratification. To build a watchtower and a wall for protection, to build a winepress expecting an abundant crop were all actions of long-range investment.

The vineyard is Israel/Judah. God planted them, invested in them to bear good, abundant fruit.

In the middle section Isaiah is speaking as the voice of God.

God is saying 'listen up, you chosen ones. I have done everything for you. I have given you the best of everything you need to grow and produce good fruit.'

What did I get? Bitter, wild, stinky, rotten grapes.

I invested so much in you. I was counting on you. Now let me tell you how angry and grieved I am that you have not produced the good fruit I expected.

I will tear down the watchtower and wall that protects you.

I'll let you get trampled. I'll let you turn yourselves into a patch of weeds, thistles and thorns.

And Isaiah concludes in his own voice again.

Do you get it Israel? You are the vineyard that God planted to be a blessing to the world.

God was looking for a good crop of justice and sees bloodshed and violence instead.

God was looking for a harvest of righteousness and instead hears the cries of victims being bled to death by poverty and discrimination.

God did God's best to establish a just society, hoping for and expecting abundant justice and righteousness. The people failed.

The worst has happened—the system has created victims and evoked their cries for help.

Violence, hunger, homelessness, greed, conspicuous consumption and corruption have run rampant.

The prophet voiced divine lament, hoping for the people to pronounce a verdict against themselves and repent.

God's judgment would be a set of destructive natural consequences as a result of the nation's rebellious will and mind, what Isaiah termed wild, or stinky grapes.

The judgment would be the absence of God's sustaining presence.

Sounds ominous, doesn't it?

Israel ended up in exile for centuries.

I want to ask, am I the only one that can see parallels between ancient Israel and the U.S.A.? Was not our nation founded on principles of justice? Have we not considered ourselves chosen and blessed by God?

Have we not produced some mighty stinky wild grapes ourselves?

The same ones in fact: violence, hunger, homelessness greed, conspicuous consumption and corruption. I do not consider myself a gloom and doom or fire and brimstone preacher, but I am seriously concerned with our nation's relationship with God right now.

God's work awaits a response from God's people.  
Our nation *has* been richly blessed.  
Many of us are accepting the blessing as our due, our just rewards without the justice.  
We people of faith are not guaranteed instant gratification.  
There is challenge as well as consolation in being God's people. There is no permission for complacency.  
Jesus tells a parable in which he says, 'for those who have been given much, much is expected.'  
He also tells his disciples that they are a city on a hill.

We have long considered ourselves to be a nation leading the world. A city on a hill.  
I think Isaiah might caution us lest we become more like a vulgar vineyard than we already have.  
Our politicians like to end their speeches with 'God bless America.' Sometimes I think that's more to win a few more votes than to actually invoke God's blessing, or even acknowledging that we still need God's blessing.  
What if they and all of us extended that remark to 'God bless America...so that America can bless the world?'  
And then what if we set out to determine what that means?  
Because that is what it means to be God's chosen.  
It will take Olympian discipline and sacrifice as individuals and as a nation to grow the kind of fruit that delights God.  
I don't think we want to continue down the road that some would lead us to further grieving and angering God.  
I do think it's time to wake up America before history repeats itself.