

When the prophet Isaiah started out with the words “let me sing for my beloved a love song...” his audience would have been expecting something very different from what they ended up hearing. Some of them would have recognized the “vine” language from earlier writings, and settled into a smug expectation that they were about to be reminded of how God chose them above all others...

Others might have heard echoes of Song of Songs, and wondered if the kids should be in earshot to hear what could include some pretty racy, sexually suggestive imagery. But they still would hear it as a word of praise. An affirmation of how much YHWH loved them.

None of them were expecting the words that followed.

As I said in Bible Study this week, this is a love song about as much as *Romeo and Juliet* is a great love story.

And much like Shakespeare’s tragedy, this song is more a condemnation and warning. The greed and violence and injustice and hatred for others cannot go on like this. There will be consequences.

God's love song for the people chosen to be God's own turns into lament because of the choices they make for themselves. Rather than be who God intends for them to be, they follow their own base desires, they choose to be independent from God. And so God leaves them to the consequences of those choices, even though it breaks God's heart to do so. There are these puns in the original text, in which God looks for justice, *mishpat*, but instead finds bloodshed, *mishpach*. God seeks righteousness, *tsedeqah*, but finds instead a cry, *tse-aqah*. Something goes missing, and suddenly all the good God intended for these people turns into something horrible.

That resonates with today's Gospel passages as well. The words Jesus says in today's reading seem harsh, contrary to his usual message of peace, love and reconciliation. But Jesus is not saying that this is how he wants things to be, how they should be. He is saying that it is how things will be, because of human nature. Jesus comes to bring "fire" to the earth, rekindling that passion for justice and righteousness that went so wrong in the time of Isaiah. But Jesus knows that it won't be an easy transition; Jesus knows that even a fire that is kindled with the best intentions can go wild, can turn destructive.

within a single household there will be people who strive to follow the new way of living that Jesus is setting out before them, and people who will cling to the safety and security of the imperfect now. Jesus knows a truth we 21st century Christians might not always want to admit: those who choose to follow Christ will be in conflict with those who don't. And worse still, those who follow Christ will sometimes be in conflict with other people who follow Christ. We work together for the coming of the Kingdom of God, but we don't always agree on the best way to get there.

So thank God for the passage from Hebrews, which reminds us that this is how it's always been. The story of faith is filled with characters of all sorts—people of high moral character, who sacrificed everything for a hope in some greater good, and people of questionable character, whose motives had a good dose of self-preservation mixed in. God has worked in and through all sorts of people in all sorts of difficult situations, and God continues to do so today. We are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses, whose lives encourage us to continue, to press on, to push forward to the goal of justice and righteousness that has always been God's hope for us. This is community in its truest sense, formed not only of the people in immediate physical proximity

with us, or even with those who share a similar point of view or philosophy. The cloud of witnesses is not limited by time or location. It spreads throughout time. It is the community of saints, some of whom we might have liked and some who might have driven us crazy. They are all there to urge us on, to keep working toward the goal, keep resisting the worst of human nature and instead strive to become more and more what God intended for us to be.

Who is in your “cloud of witnesses”? Whose life and example gives you encouragement when you feel like giving up? Who teaches you how to be a better human, to live a life shaped by love of God and neighbor? Who do you hope to see at the finish line? And who is looking to you as an example of their own lives, seeing you as the one standing in the crowd urging them on?

We were not created to grasp and claw at each other like wild dogs. We were created to be children of God, created in God’s likeness and part of a community of believers whose purpose is to make God’s love known throughout creation.

“Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking

to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.”

Amen.