

The prophet Isaiah started us out today with a love song for a vineyard. He describes the care that God the vineyard owner takes in the creation, protection, and pleasant planting of the world.

If I were going to write a love song today, I would write a love song about Stevens Point, Wisconsin. Seriously, we live in one of the most beautiful places in the world.

My love song would probably focus mostly on Stevens Point in summer when the weather is—no exaggeration—perfect, and early fall before the rain washes all the color out of the trees. And maybe there would be a verse or two of begrudging respect for winter. Probably nothing about spring, because I don't believe it actually exists here.

There would be a whole stanza, though, about the time I was driving to Appleton and passed a dairy farm on a hill where the calves were actually skipping, I mean really, dancing on the green grass in the sunlight like an advertisement for pure joy.

I would write, too, about the beauty not only of the small towns and the fields and the trees and the rivers and lakes, but also the beauty I see when I look out at your faces on Sunday mornings. This beautiful congregation. People of all ages and all kinds of different backgrounds and life experiences living and worshipping and serving and fellowshiping together in faith.

There would be at least two stanzas in this love song about multiple generations tying quilts together.

My love song would be long, and overflowing with gratitude, and kind of mushy. And I would be tempted to leave it at that. Because, honestly, I don't want to sing about the brokenness and the heartbreak in this beautiful congregation, in this beautiful community, in our beautiful world. I want to wrap myself in the memory of those last, long warm days of summer, turn off the news and pretend that the beauty all around us is all there is.

But it's not.

Isaiah's love song isn't very long or mushy. Quickly it turns from images of careful planting and tending to despair and heartbreak as the vineyard is overrun, and as it destroys itself from within. The love song ends with a powerful indictment: when the Lord of hosts looked upon the vineyard, God's beautiful, pleasant planting, God "expected justice, but saw bloodshed; righteousness, but heard a cry!"

Do you see the bloodshed in our world today? Do you hear the cries of people who are hungry and hurting, around the world and in our own neighborhoods? Or, like me, are you tempted to look away: to reject the images and stories and terrible truths of everything that is wrong in this beautiful vineyard?

It's a very natural human response, you know. Human beings have limited empathy, and can really only process so much bad news before we start tuning out. It's not good for your mental health to care deeply and passionately about everyone and everything. At some point, your body and your brain are going to start rejecting that bad news in the name of self-preservation.

And it's good to know that about ourselves, and be honest about it, but we also need to know and be honest about the truth that the causes and the people and the problems we don't care about are actually not just *important* to God but also actual manifestations of Jesus, God's son, our Lord.

Jesus quotes scripture to the crowd and says, "The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone." Jesus is the stone the builders rejected. And Jesus is in every person we reject, too. Whether we reject them outright or reject them by our apathy, the people we reject are God's beloved cornerstones.

This week I attended a Wisconsin Council of Churches forum about making poverty the key issue of this election, this legislative session, and the state budgeting process this year. One of the goals of the forum was to empower us to talk about poverty in meaningful ways that appeal to the moral and ethical concerns of people and politicians across party lines. They called it "elevating the debate."

This is not an easy thing to do.

One of the issues we talked about at the poverty summit was the need for more access to family-supporting jobs: full time jobs that pay a living wage, enough to keep a family above the poverty level, and include access to healthcare. I've heard interesting conversations between reasonable people who disagree on how to get us to that goal. I've also heard and seen some really unreasonable, degrading and dehumanizing attacks against poor people, particularly against fast food workers making minimum wage.

Maybe you've heard it and seen it, too. Maybe you've even "liked" it or shared it or thought it was funny. So I need to be clear: I'm not using this example to make some of you feel guilty and make others of you feel self-righteous. I'm using it in the hopes that it will make all of us, myself especially included, a little uncomfortable and possibly open to re-examining the way each of us reject and dehumanize people living in poverty. So, if you're wondering if this sermon is about you, it is. It's about all of you, and about me, too.

So, if I clean up the language a little bit, the angry rant boils down to this:

People who work at fast food restaurants don't deserve to make \$10 or \$15/hour.

Fast food jobs are supposed to be for high school kids.

If you're an adult trying to support your family on a fast food job, you're probably really stupid.

Go back to school and get a real job.

Now, I could respond to that argument with the facts and statistics I learned at the poverty summit this week. For example, 87% of minimum wage workers are 20 years old or older, so, *not* high school kids. And 45% of minimum wage workers have some college education.

But I also learned at the poverty summit that people don't change their minds because of statistics and facts. It doesn't work.

So what does work? Usually advocacy experts say to focus on personal stories, so people build a real connection and understanding based on a relationship with a

person who gives them new insight into the issue. But when it comes to people living poverty, we are so judgmental, and so harsh and unforgiving in our judgment that even that personal approach doesn't break through our prejudice and hatred.

One of our presenters suggested that, if you want people to have compassion for people living in poverty, you should focus on *children* living in poverty. And that makes sense, because children make up the majority of people living in poverty, and their struggles, their hunger, the way they are formed by the constant stress of living in poverty, all of that is an accident of birth. It's not their fault.

We find it easier to care about and care for children because they are "innocent." But ask yourself, do only "innocent" lives matter to God? Are only the people we deem worthy and deserving actually worthy and deserving of compassion and understanding?

What it comes down to is this: the person you degrade, and dehumanize, and call names ... that person is Jesus. That person working at McDonald's is Jesus. And she's Jesus regardless of how smart she is, or what life choices she's made. The stone the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone. The person you reject is the cornerstone: an essential, important, beloved child of God.

Now we're all feeling bad. Thinking about it this way takes a lot of the fun out of making fun of people. And I'm kind of "sorry, not sorry" about that. But I want you to know that preachers preach the sermons they themselves need to hear. And I needed to hear that the people I've rejected, either by outright cruelty or by just not caring, I needed to hear that those people are Jesus. Thinking about it this way makes me repent, and it makes hope and pray I never do it again, even though I also know that I'm a sinner, and that this won't be the last time I'll be repenting, and praying for God's forgiveness. So, it won't be the last time you'll hear this sermon message, either.

For the record, I'm also not comfortable with angry rants that attack the humanity of wealthy people. That happens sometimes. But there's a crucial difference: people who have wealth and power and privilege *do not* face

anywhere close to even comparable levels of rejection, persecution, oppression and degradation as do people who lack wealth, power and privilege. That was true in Jesus' day and it's true today, too. There's a reason Jesus is constantly talking about the problem with wealth and power, there's a reason he's constantly attacking the powers that be and the status quo and lifting up women, children, the poor, and social outcasts. There's a reason the first beatitude is "blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

Jesus sees the people we have rejected because they are poor, because they are gay, because they've been convicted of a felony, because they are dying of Ebola in West Africa, or because they are going to bed hungry and homeless in Stevens Point, Wisconsin, and Jesus calls them blessed.

God sees the stone the builders rejected and makes it the cornerstone. God looks out at the vineyard, this beautiful, precious, pleasant planting, and God sees it all. God sees the beauty of creation and the beauty of the way we care for each other ... because we do, of course. Even with our limited human empathy, we care and care.

God also sees the brokenness, the sin, the angry rants, the outright violence and the apathy, the way we demean and dehumanize each other, the way we reject each other and the way we reject God's love. God's love song for us takes all of that in.

I'd like to think God's love song gets a little mushy at times, and that God is sometimes overwhelmed, as we are, with the beauty of this world and the beauty of life and of living things. But God's love song is for the whole world, in all its beauty and all its brokenness. God's love is the source of all beauty, and the healing balm for all brokenness. And God's love is the reason we can have hope.

When it comes to big issues like poverty, it's easy to get cynical, to get angry and judgmental, to be apathetic and try to ignore it, to get overwhelmed and feel like there's nothing we can do. But if Jesus Christ was born, lived, died and rose from the dead, then anything is possible. And we truly are empowered to be God's hands and feet and voices in the world.

So, what can we do? First of all, regardless of what political party you support, you can vote in November. And you can talk to your representatives about poverty and ask them to make addressing it a priority. One easy way to do that is to follow the QR code on your bulletin. That'll take you to the Wisconsin Council of Churches

<http://org2.salsalabs.com/o/7172/p/dia/action3/common/public/?action_KEY=18346> Faithful Citizenship Statement.

The Wisconsin Council of Churches is made up of all kinds of Christians whose political views vary widely, so the statement is mostly non-partisan. But, if you're not comfortable signing it, I'd urge you to make your own statement and call and write your representative with what alleviating poverty in our community would mean and look like to you. Even if you do sign the statement, making a more personal connection with your representative is a good idea. You might think engaging with politicians is a waste of time, but again: anything is possible with God.

Politicians can be convinced to use their power to address the systemic causes of poverty.

The poor in spirit can be blessed and the meek can inherit the earth.

The people we have rejected can become Jesus to us.

Our sins can be completely forgiven.

And the love song of God, sung by the Holy Spirits into our hearts and minds, can inspire us to work for a world where no one goes to bed hungry, where people are able to work and support their families, where people of multiple generations tie quilts together, and where the Lord of Hosts looks out and sees justice and righteousness, and peace in the vineyard. Amen.