

## **Sermon: Sunday, June 22, 2025**

Grace to you and peace from God, our Creator, and from our Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

In response to the US president's decision to bomb Iran, Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg wrote the following prayer last night:

May every single human being on this planet be safe.

May every single person be protected from harm.

May we bring into being a time in which we are all free from those who do evil – together, speedily and in our days. [Amen]

There's no shortage of images in the Bible that help describe people's faith and relationship to God or to Jesus. And the love that that faith and relationship are rooted in.

These images are often overshadowed – and sometimes outright overtaken – by our society's drive for power. When that happens, we lose sight of the relationship aspect of those images in the Bible, and then faith – and God's love – get bumped to the side.

But the Bible reminds us that God established relationship with humanity from the beginning. In Genesis chapter two, God formed humanity out of the clay of the earth. That formation, that relationship, has endured throughout humanity's history despite our own actions.

And in John's gospel, Jesus expands that relationship with the image of him as the vine and God as the vinegrower. The vinegrower tends the vine so that its branches are able to bear fruit in abundance.

Both of these activities, shaping clay and tending grapevines, require careful hands-on work. They require attention to detail. They describe God's involvement in our lives and in our world – continually tending and shaping us by God's love.

But they aren't meant to imply that we're passive recipients of this relationship. It's quite the opposite, in fact.

Generally speaking, we tend to think of biblical prophecies as visions of doom, or a fate already determined by God and that nothing can change what will happen. But this chapter of Jeremiah presents prophecy in a different way.

In this reading, prophecy is intended to convince the people to change their behavior and turn back toward God - YHWH – and follow YHWH's commands for life.

The people had been worshiping other gods, and had gained wealth at the expense of others – specifically, by not caring for those who were economically and socially vulnerable in their society. In effect, they had abandoned YHWH and their community.

So, Jeremiah appealed to them to change their ways and to return to YHWH. To worship only YHWH and to restore justice and equity, so that the course of their community's future would be a bright one.

And while our reading ends with hope and the possibility for that change on the part of the people, in v12 the people say, “Thanks, but we’re going to follow our own plans.” Their response goes beyond just being stubborn – it’s willful disobedience. They are unwilling to change.

And there were consequences for their decision. But like a potter shaping clay, YHWH continued to shape the experiences and the future of the people. Even when the clay resisted and became misshapen, YHWH lovingly reworked it into another vessel.

Unlike Jeremiah’s audience, the people who first heard Jesus’ words in John’s gospel were a community that had been thrown away. They were proclaiming the good news of Jesus in the midst of religious and political persecution, and social and cultural ridicule. It wasn’t an easy time for them.

So, the writer of John used Jesus’ teachings to help them hold onto their life-giving relationship with Jesus.

Because when Jesus says that he is the vine, he’s talking about the part of the plant that’s actually rooted in the ground and grows up and out from there. God, his Father, is the vine grower. And like any good vinegrower, the Father tends the vine with care, pruning where necessary so that it bears as much fruit as possible.

In other words, the vine is dependent on the vinegrower – and vice versa. The vine needs the vinegrower for its optimal growth and production, and even its abundance – because it will produce fruit in abundance if it’s cared for.

And the vinegrower needs the vine to produce, to make abundance possible for sustenance and life.

The branches, the part that actually produces fruit, are what grow out of the vine. So just as the vine and the vinegrower can’t survive without each other, neither can the branches survive – let alone bear fruit in abundance – without the vine and the vinegrower.

The mutual nature of the relationship between these three is one of profound dependence and reliance. None can survive without the other.

Both of these images, the clay and the vine, describe faith and people’s relationship with God and with one another. In both readings, God is steadfast. God is hands-on. Lovingly working and shaping and nurturing the people so that they might fulfill God’s purpose in and for the world.

God is still steadfast, and hands-on. Working and shaping and nurturing us and the whole body of Christ, so that we might fulfill God’s promise and purpose in and for the world. What’s often missing, especially in the US and other Western cultures, is the recognition and acknowledgement is the love with which God does this.

And when we don’t pay attention to that, we ignore our relationship with God – with Jesus, and our relationships with humanity fall by the wayside. We are witnessing the effects of that on a daily basis.

The modern-day prophets are pleading with us to turn. To change our behavior, our way of thinking, and remember our connectedness to God and to one another. And because there’s so

much work to do, it's hard to know if that will make a difference or if we should just say, "Thanks, but we're gonna keep doing what we're doing."

Because what doesn't always make it to the forefront are the examples of people who live into their relationships with God and humanity.

Here, yesterday, we hosted the Eastside Love & Justice Pride Service. Less than 24 hours ago, there was an interfaith gospel choir in this space. If you listen closely, you can hear reverberations of their music in the rafters. They were that powerful.

There were also about fifty people who attended. Some from our partner congregations, and many others from the surrounding community. We heard first-hand stories about the value of the relationships people have in their lives with those who are most vulnerable in the LGBTQ+ community.

And woven throughout the worship was the reminder of our rootedness in God's love. And that that rootedness is what holds us in relationship with God and one another – no matter what's going on in the world or in our lives.

In a setting like that, it's almost like being in an oasis – taking a step back from the fray of life. But moments like that keep us rooted, grounded, in our relationship with God. Shaping us and the way we interact with the world.

Recognizing that what we do, the decisions we make, don't only affect us. Because we have an entire network of relationships – not just the people we come into contact with on a regular basis. But the communities we're part of and the relationships that move outward from them.

Keeping in mind that we are in constant relationship with God and the rest of humanity – and with creation, for that matter – isn't easy. But keeping it in mind, remembering that relationship of love, shapes who we are and who we become.

If you've ever worked with a pottery wheel or watched someone do it, it's messy work. The finished product is beautiful. But as the clay is being worked, stuff gets splattered everywhere.

And when we see photos of vineyards, they're usually taken so that everything looks neat and ordered – almost perfect. But when you get up close to the plants themselves, the branches loop in and around each other and the vine. And it's hard to tell where one begins and another ends.

But God is here as the potter, as the one who tends the vine. In steadfast love. Hands-on. Working and shaping and nurturing us in our life together with God and others.

As that happens, we discover that we don't passively endure this process. That through us, God continues to shape and nurture our world – deepening our relationship with it, empowering us and moving us toward a future where everyone is safe and protected from harm. And where all know the abundance of God's enduring love.

Thanks be to God. Amen.