

Devotion – Sixth Week after Pentecost

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Two weeks ago I began to look at some of the themes in the book “70 Hebrew Words Every Christian Should Know.” I started with the sounds in Hebrew that we miss when those words are translated into English. In Isaiah 5, there is a story about a vineyard planter who plants choice vines and does everything he should to tend it, but it yields “wild grapes” instead of good grapes. The vineyard planter complains that he did everything he was supposed to, and yet the result was grapes that are no good, so he is going to destroy the vineyard. Then the planter announces that the vineyard is the house of Israel, and the people of Judah were the vines he planted. “He expected justice, but saw bloodshed; righteousness, but heard a cry!”

This just doesn’t translate so well. But if you go back and look at the Hebrew, there’s a reason that these words justice/bloodshed and righteousness/cry were used. It has to do with how the words sound when you read them aloud.

“He expected *“mishpat,”* but saw *“mishpach”*; *“tsedaqah”* but heard *“tseaqah.”* To the Hebrew reader, this heightens the disappointment of God in how his people have turned out. They were so close to being his beloved people – literally one letter in the Hebrew is changed in each word to make the contrast. That doesn’t come across in the English very well. The translation sort of makes bloodshed seem like injustice, and the translation of “cry,” which is actually more like a desperate cry for help in cases of mass slaughter, sort of makes it seem like unrighteousness. However, the author of Isaiah didn’t use the negatives for justice and righteousness – he could have done that by adding a negative adjective to the Hebrew word. The author wanted to use the sounds of these words to emphasize that God’s beloved people – the people of the covenant – have violated that covenant. They have taken God’s love and ignored it. Chapter 5 of Isaiah goes on to convict them of all kinds of bad behavior – concerned only about accumulating land and wealth, drunkenness, bribery, self-absorption, and lack of care for each other. As a result, God will let an invading army destroy them.

And it didn’t have to be that way – they were so close – all they had to do was obey God’s commandments to love him and each other. But *“mishpat”* turned to *“mishpach,”* and *“tsedaqah”* turned to *“tseaqah.”*

A lesson for us all – close isn’t good enough. With God, it’s all or nothing. God demands our total devotion. As Jesus responded to the Pharisees regarding the greatest commandment: “You shalt love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.” Love with all our hearts and souls and minds results in *“mishpat”* and *“tsedaqah,”* not *“mishpach”* and *“tseaqah.”*

Jeanne