

April 29– Read Nehemiah 5:1-6, Amos 9:11-15. “Israel was a land of vineyards....it is not surprising that the vine and the vineyard, so characteristic of this country’s agricultural fertility, serve as potent images for the land itself.” Today most vineyards are large and owned by well-off people. But Nehemiah 5 told of an economic crisis in Israel after the exile. The families upset that they had to use their vineyards to secure loans to buy food or pay taxes were clearly not very wealthy. The prophet Amos’ picture of a better future expected many families would plant vineyards next to their gardens. Before Israel’s exile, the prophets sternly rebuked economic injustice (e.g. Isaiah 1:16-17, Amos 2:6-8). After the exile, human nature was still there. Some people with lots of resources exploited their less wealthy neighbors. As Nehemiah 5:6 showed, “Nehemiah ... didn’t remain calm or apathetic.... He exemplified righteous indignation. ‘God is a righteous judge, a God who is angry at evil every single day’ (Psalm 7:11).” When you see injustice, do you tend to remain calm or apathetic, or react with righteous indignation? Like most of the prophets, Amos did not make his words of judgment the last words. (“The worst thing is never the last thing.”) In his concluding promise of a better future (“In that day...”), he said God’s people would “plant vineyards” because God would “plant them.” As a participant in God’s promises (cf. Galatians 3:29), how does this promise of God planting you in a secure, fruitful world made new speak to your heart?

April 30. Read Hosea 14:4-8, Isaiah 61:1-3, 10-11. The Hebrew prophets used vines (and more broadly, the whole image of God as a planter and grower) as symbols to teach the Hebrew people about God’s life-giving, renewing power. Hosea, like most other prophets, warned Israel that their unjust behavior and persistent worship of Canaanite idols was breaking their covenant with God. That exposed them to danger without God’s protection. But Hosea’s final image of God healing them and making them “blossom like the vine” said, “It’s always possible to turn. God’s people always have a choice.” No matter what lies in your past, you always have the choice to turn back to God. When have you done that? Will you do it whenever you need to? Ø Jesus read the first three verses of Isaiah 61 in his hometown synagogue and said he was the fulfilment of that promise (cf. Luke 4:16-21). His knowledge of the passage most likely extended to verse 11’s beautiful promise of God growing “righteousness and praise before all the nations.” Identify one or two ways you are aware of God accomplishing that, either in history or in your life experience today

May 1. Read Isaiah 5:1-7, Mark 12:1-12. Isaiah 5 created an image the people of Israel loved: themselves as God's vineyard. Sadly, Isaiah didn't make the image's message positive. He said that they had disappointed their God—despite being planted in the terroir (the unique terrain, in which the grapes grew) of a fertile hillside, the vineyard produced “rotten grapes.” Jesus' vineyard parable used that well-known image, and like Isaiah used it sadly. His story exposed the murder in the hearts of “religious” people who thought their titles gave them the authority to rebuke and refuse him. Isaiah emphasized his point with Hebrew wordplay. “In Isa 5: 7 God looks for “justice” (mishpat), but finds “bloodshed” (mishpah). He seeks “righteousness” (tsedaqa), but gets “cries of distress” (tseaa). Someone has suggested an English equivalent: ‘He sought equity, but found iniquity, a righteous nation, but instead, lamentation.’” Have you seen people who began seeking God's justice or righteousness, but instead produced bloodshed or distress? How can you avoid doing that? After Jesus told his pointed story, the religious authorities wanted to arrest him, but “they were afraid of the crowd.” Ironically, in this case “the crowd” saw more clearly than their religious leaders. What blocked the leaders' vision? How can you keep your spiritual eyes and ears clear to recognize God's work in both expected and unexpected places?

May 2. Read Mark 4:2-9, 14-20. Jesus told a parable about a farmer sowing seed, and where the seed landed made a big difference. (People trained in wine tasting say one layer of a wine's flavor reflects the terroir, the soil, in which the grapes grew.) At the story's end, he used a common Hebrew expression: “Whoever has ears to listen should pay attention!” It was a way of saying the story's meaning wasn't obvious, that understanding its message took attention and thought. Verse 9, as Jesus used it, was not mainly about eardrums. “In the Bible the ear is synonymous with the heart and mind as an organ of cognition (Prov 2:2; Is 6:9–10), and true hearing involves listening and understanding (Job 34:16).” What has helped you tune your inner, spiritual “ears” to God's voice? What helps you persist in seeking to understand God's teachings, rather than just giving up? When we “listen and pay attention” to what Jesus said about his story, we realize that he wasn't talking about farming, either. He was teaching lessons about spiritual growth, the factors that can keep us from growing, and the importance of taking in God's good “seed” and allowing it to grow. What steps are you taking to make your heart and mind “good soil” in which God's word can grow and bear a good crop?

May 3. Read Proverbs 24:30-34. This passage expressed simple wisdom. “One of the single most important themes in the book of Proverbs contrasts lazy people with the diligent. The sages considered laziness a preeminent type of folly that results in destitution.” It is of course wiser to work diligently than to lazily while away our days. (Like all the proverbs, there are exceptions. At times lazy people end up wealthy, for various reasons.) But as we recall how the prophets and Jesus used vineyards as a spiritual image, the proverb may also tell us about our inner life. In terms of a physical vineyard, these were the results the proverb described: “Thorns grew all over it; weeds covered the ground, and the stone wall was falling down.” What would be some of the specific results you (but maybe not always other people) could discern if you are “lazy” about caring for your inner “vineyard”? On the other hand, what steps might it take for you to avoid spiritual poverty by actively caring for your inner vineyard?