

“Seedtime and the Harvest”

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Scripture

Mark 4:3-9

3 "Listen! A sower went out to sow. 4 And as he sowed, some seed fell on the path, and the birds came and ate it up. 5 Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it did not have much soil, and it sprang up quickly, since it had no depth of soil. 6 And when the sun rose, it was scorched; and since it had no root, it withered away. 7 Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no grain. 8 Other seed fell into good soil and brought forth grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirty and sixty and a hundredfold." 9 And he said, "Let anyone with ears to hear listen!"

2 Corinthians 9:6-11

6 The point is this: the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. 7 Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. 8 And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work. 9 As it is written, "He scatters abroad, he gives to the poor; his righteousness endures forever." 10 He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness. 11 You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity, which will produce thanksgiving...

Sermon

I want to talk about money, this morning. Scary I know, but hey, today is Halloween after all.

Money, or specifically the "love of money," according to Jesus, "is the root of all evil!" So, it's of little wonder then that we avoid talking much about it in church. Budgets and business meetings seem so unspiritual. We would much rather pray, sing, or even listen to a sermon before sitting around to decide how to raise and spend money. But this morning we also celebrate the end of our fall pledge season! As the old hymn says, "we are bringing in the sheaves" with joyous fervor!

A momentous harvest of precious gifts given joyfully by each one of us to do God's work in this time and in this place. We are also grateful to Denise's hard work as this year's Stewardship coordinator to getting us to the point of 99.8% of our goal!

For farmers, harvest is the result of months of hard work and waiting. In a good year the sweat tastes sweet and those aching backs and muscles that carried those sheaves into the barn do give way to dancing over the abundant provisions that will carry them through another year. But in a bad year, fears and uncertainty can overwhelm any celebration.

As a fellowship we have been through some difficult years. But we have been through far more good years where we have experienced God's abundance! Any real farmer will be quick to remind you that there is no harvest unless seed is planted. And so, in actuality,

Denise's efforts of collecting our pledges this past month and all of our prompt and generous responses are both a joyous harvest and expectant planting time!

Now, as many of you know, I was raised on a farm on the plains of Kansas, where wheat fields stretch to the horizon. It is during the fall that this hard red winter wheat, which is grown from Texas to South Dakota is sown (or drilled as we called it). Flour milled from this wheat is used by bakers around the world and the reason why that portion of the country is referred to as the "breadbasket" of the nation.

It is called "winter wheat" because after it is planted, hopefully by mid-October, the kernels will have ample moisture and enough warm, sunny days to sprout and grow several inches before the harsh winter weather sets in. Then when the days are the shortest and the coldest the plant enters a "dormant" phase. The plant stops growing, or more correctly grows very slowly while remaining alive and green for several months even through weeks of sub-zero temperatures or covered by snow.

Alive, green, and anchored in the soil for dear life these little plants not only help to reduce wind erosion (a huge problem out on the wide open plains) but they also can become a source of winter pasture for cattle and wildlife to graze on.

By late March as the plant senses that the days are getting longer and warmer an internal switch goes on, and in less than three months the plant will grow from a measly six inches to more than three feet tall! And each plant will produce and fill a "head" containing 15 to 30 grains of wheat from the initial seed that was sown.

So, while a 30-fold increase is possible, it is seldom reached, let alone Jesus' impossible expectations of 60 or 100-fold increase! Hopefully then by early June, at least in south central Kansas, the wheat begins to turn a golden color signaling that it's harvest time. That is why, for me, the fall is more a time for planting than harvesting - it's buried deep within my psyche from an early age.

In similar fashion our fall pledge and budget season, I believe, is more about the hopes and dreams that we are planting than they are about bringing sheaves safely into the barn. When a farmer places seed into the earth, it is an act of faith, and a dramatic sign of hope pointing to a future reality.

Anyone who has tried to farm or garden knows far too well and sometimes all too painfully, that a lot can go wrong to ruin their hard work and their best efforts. Just like that farmer in Jesus' parable we too carry our precious gifts, our hopes, and our dreams in dirty burlap bags as we go out in search of fertile soil.

And like so many farmers before us, we too must pray for rain when we need it and sometimes pray for the rains to stop when we've had too much! But not only is the weather out of our control but so are the multiple pests, diseases and weeds that can bring our efforts to nothing. Like any farmer, we too must hold onto the faith, that with God's help, our dreams along with some hard work will grow into a bountiful harvest one day - maybe even 30, or an unheard of harvest of 60 to a 100 times greater than what we had originally planted!

Now the passage we read is filled with metaphors, analogies and allegories and I will not be able to harvest all of them this morning. But I do want to point out a couple as I close.

One is that God is the sower, the seed is the gospel, and we are the dirt, but hopefully in a good way? I kind of like it that Mark does not specifically name his metaphors which in the end allows for a broader range of possibilities and application. Both Matthew and Luke however felt the need to take Mark's story and add their own specific interpretation of Jesus' parable.

But I digress!

God as the sower, according to Mark appears hopelessly naive, as he sloppily throws seeds around with wild abandon, wasting precious kernels on ground that any good farmer would know will not sprout those seeds, let alone produce much of a crop. As dirt (in a positive way!), we first must be receptive, then need to enable this Gospel to explode far beyond anything imaginable!

The reason I added the passage from 2 Corinthians is that it provides us specifics of what makes for particularly fertile soil for the Gospel. "Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver." And as I sang loudly in Sunday school in response, "So give him all you got!"

But God not only wants you and me to be good dirt but the 2 Corinthians passage seems to imply that we too are also sowers of the Gospel seed! And if we want the Gospel to explode into our world we cannot be stingy with how we share the bounty which God has given us!

Now I don't know about you, but as I look back on my life, I realize that I have not always been receptive or fertile soil. Far too often I know that I have allowed my crust to harden to the point that no seed could penetrate. At times I have been pushed down and walked over so much that nothing could ever grow in such hard a barren ground. And at other times I resisted the cultivation and the necessary manure to soften and enrich allowing the Gospel seed to grow deep roots.

But in spite of all that, the Divine sower, for some crazy reason, kept on insisting on casting seed my way! Perhaps, I guess, with the indomitable hope "that maybe this time he'll be ready?" So, if God never gives up on my potential to produce a bountiful crop, how then can I choose to not act in similarly faithful ways, especially with the poor and downtrodden, to sow Gospel seed.

Sowing and planting is a sign of hope - an act of faith! "Farming," as my daddy used to say, "teaches humility." What he meant by that, is the constant reminder that we are mere mortals, dependent upon God and Divine creation for our daily sustenance. We too, here at FCMF, are also mere mortals, small in numbers and yet somehow mighty in our acts of generosity and faith.

Our pledge goal is actually quite puny when compared to what so many other churches are able to raise, but considering the individual circumstances and limitations for many of us the amount you give is truly astounding! When I hear of the amounts that some other churches insist is the bare minimum for their operations I am simply curfuffed by the fact that they can do so much less with so much more? Most churches over the past year or so have had to drastically cut staff.

We, on the other hand, are actually proposing to increase staff time. But this highlights that the real issue in the end is not the size of our budget but the size of our hearts! After all that

is where generosity grows. We may not control the size of the plot we've been given, but if we cultivate every inch of it, protecting and nurturing its fertility we know the more abundant will be the harvest! May we always remain humble farmers in the realization that,

"...God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly... God, who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest... You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity, which will produce thanksgiving..."

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