

Just Sow the Seeds for God's Harvest

Isaiah 55: 8-13 Matthew 13: 1-9

As I count down to the end of 34 years in active ministry, I can say that there are many things that happened and many things that didn't happen over that time. There seemed to be promise in many places and possibilities, but only some were fulfilled, while others languished before dying, and others mercifully died quickly. There were lives touched and healed while others remained broken and untouched.

There were so many different directions and different priorities, either for me personally or for the church itself. Being a pastor in a full-time situation is one of the most demanding jobs that you'll find. You're expected to demonstrate a high level of competence in a host of areas. On any given day, you may start off with a Bible study, go to a budget meeting, counsel someone grieving, visit the sick in the hospital, follow-up on a new member, plan the worship service, go to a building and grounds meeting, chat with the music director, work on a community issue, and address some denominational concern. The next day would be the same kind of jumble of another variety of tasks demanding discrete knowledge in a host of areas mixed in with unavoidable interruptions. Full-time pastors are prone to burnout and this is why.

I once interviewed for a position on Presbytery staff and knew that one of the questions that sunk me was, "What is your daily plan?" My daily plan was to do the best I could with whatever the day threw at me. The interviewer found that to be a ridiculous answer. I believe the fellow was a pastor, but I wondered what a delightful call he must have where he can make plans on a daily basis that are bulletproof to the reality of what a pastor's day is really like.

Having done so much of this for so long, what did it all accomplish? I'm not sure. I've certainly learned a lot along the way, but learning a lot wasn't the point of the journey. It was supposed to be to do the work of the Lord and to lead others into his path. I don't think that has happened much to be honest. I have a feeling I may have simply confused more people than led them to embrace the promise.

On the other hand, I'm thinking about this the wrong way. It isn't about me accomplishing something and getting an award, a plaque, a trophy, or a gold watch. It was about serving, serving in the mission of the one who I call Lord and Savior in my life. While hardly flawless in my execution of that mission, I did my best and have no regrets about it. However, quantifying or qualifying that servant work is simply the wrong approach.

In our scriptures, we can all learn about the right approach, the sacred approach, and set aside the worldly approach that measures and weighs, analyzes and evaluates, standardizes and quantifies, and determines the merit based on the result. Worldly value systems simply have no meaningful application in the servant work of being faithful.

Our first reading is from Isaiah 55, the ending of what scholars will call Second Isaiah, written in the period when the liberation of God's people was imminent or occurring. They were to be liberated by the Persians from Babylonian captivity and returned to their homeland, reflecting the very different and more successful strategy of the Persians in conducting their occupation of conquered lands.

Isaiah recognizes this as God's deliverance of God's people. The yoke of punishment had been lifted as God had sent a **messiah** to save God's people. No, the messiah is not Jesus! It was Cyrus the Great, Emperor of Persia, who was acknowledged as God's messiah for returning God's people to the Promised Land, for carrying out God's will for God's people. So, this is a very hope-filled time for an oppressed people.

Isaiah 55 starts with an invitation to the thirsty to come and drink, to the penniless to buy and eat.

Wait a minute – the penniless are invited to “buy” stuff? *Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost.* There is God's ridiculous economics at work again. God is literally giving it away with no desire to make a good return on his investment, doesn't care if the debt gets repaid, and is just fine giving away the abundance of his blessings. God's restaurant could never survive in the real world.

God would teach Bernie Sanders a lesson. “Free health care! Free college! Wipe out student debt! Raise the minimum wage! If you're rich, you pay more taxes.” God would say, “Bernie, Bernie, Bernie. All people need to do is share. I put plenty of everything into my creation. You just need to do like what we tell the children that you should share so that everyone has whatever they need. That shouldn't be so hard.” This proves the point that God is a communist – lower case “c”. (See Garden of Eden.)

Why does God do this, acting in a way that we cannot imagine in our common life experience? We expect the cost, to pay down the debt, to have a levy placed against us. There is no free lunch, right? Yet not so from God who tells us at the beginning of today's selection:

*For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord.
For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts.*

God wants us to know that God has his own independent and sovereign purpose, one that exceeds our reasoning, understanding, judgment, or scrutiny. God's got plans that we'll never figure out. Get your faith life in order; if you're going to serve God seriously, then you're going to need it.

This raining of blessing from God has transformed the potential for the land. While we have the processional praise of all of nature, *For you shall go out in joy,
and be led back in peace; the mountains and the hills before you shall burst into song,
and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands,*
we also have the very substantial change in what the land is bringing forth: *Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress; instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle.*

Tall, proud trees rise up from where painful thorn and brier had reflected the plight of God's people. Now they would be able to stand on their Promised Land, restored as a people by their God.

We see the power of God's word, God's covenant promise of new life being fulfilled. We see God's people transformed by the power of God's word, seeding new life amid the despair and decay that had been their yoke borne in their exile from God.

For the silly pastor who is asking what he has done as if he could measure it, the message is that God is working God's will through every avenue of creation. Your job as a servant is to serve and leave the harvest to God.

Jesus' telling of the parable of the sower also seeks to describe the power of God's word and will, God's covenant of new life for God's people. Jesus' story concerns a farmer who sowed the seed for his crops in the custom of farmers in that time, by hand using broadcast or throwing. The farmer in this story is the servant of God. The servant is doing the usual sloppy job, scattering seed all over the place. A good farmer would be far more careful sowing to ensure that the seed went where it would be most productive. The servant of God isn't like that as he or she goes about their mission service. God really doesn't care. The servant is tossing the seed everywhere with some reckless abandon, like a pastor who can't plan his day. But clearly, the seed is going everywhere just as God's promise goes to everyone. All of God's people, in whatever condition they're in, are literally getting pelted by seed, by the blessing of God's promise when the servant is faithful in casting the seed of God's promise.

The seed on the path falls on packed earth and can't take root, and the seed becomes feed for birds. The seed falling among the rocks found scant earth and couldn't survive the heat of the day. The seed that fell among the thorns and weeds were choked off. Finally, the seed on the good soil got everything it needed, yielding a wondrous harvest, many times what was sown. Actually, yields of a hundred, sixty, and thirty-fold are rather unusual. When the message of the Kingdom finds good soil, the reward is never just average or pretty good like four- to ten-fold which would be great. No, it's always amazing in its excellence – 100-, 60-, and 30-fold.

Of course, Jesus wasn't giving a lesson on farming techniques or how to improve crop yields. He later explains the parable to his typically dazed and confused disciples, like the befuddled pastor, that the parable was referring to how the message of God's promise and God's Kingdom takes hold of the believer, or not, and what blessings result when the power of God's word gets finds good soil among the faithful.

Gaining the harvest is an ongoing process of planting, growing and reaping, much of it work that is taken up by still other servants as God's works things out to fulfill God's eventual harvest. The seed of God's word and its promise of blessing is always seeking that good soil on which it might bear the exceptional harvest. It is not a single event parable, but a description of life pattern and process, of God's promise and God's

Kingdom taking root amid the typically hostile conditions of Empire, whoever is in charge of whatever Empire at whatever time period.

We should carry out the implications further. We may think that the path, the rocks, and the thorns are unchanging. But if they describe the state of a person's faith, aren't they also subject to change? The road may be re-claimed by the farmer, and the traffic re-routed. Or the rocks may be removed, or the brambles and thorns cleared out in other seasons of planting. In the same way, a person who is unprepared to receive, grow, and bear fruit in God's word in one season may be much better prepared in another.

Finally, we should also perceive the three levels of the good harvest from good soil. Not all good soil produces the same yield. Like a tag line for a commercial that makes too many promises, "Results may vary." That's shorthand for "everyone is different, does different things, and does them differently as well as sees them differently." The outcomes cannot be predicted. Each is blessed according to what blessing is received, and that is God's business, not mine or yours.

As we navigate our journey in serving the Lord faithfully, just sow the seeds. Sow the seeds with reckless and selfless abandon. They cost you nothing really, but they provide the sources of blessings for many. You may not see the harvest or find yourself basking in the glow of success or victory or anything else. Just sow faithfully and leave the growth and the harvest to the One who sent you.