

Growing God's Garden: 4) A Harvest of Hope
Deuteronomy 8:6-10; Matthew 25:14-30
October 23, 2005

The harvest season must be the most rewarding time of a farmer's work. The months of labor that have gone into plowing fields, planting seeds, watering and fertilizing the sprouts, weeding and pruning to keep the plants growing healthy finally issues in a bountiful crop to be enjoyed or sold. Apples are picked from the orchards; grapes are plucked from the vine; corn is taken from the stalk.

One of the joys of living in the Central Valley for a few years was reaping the benefits of a fresh harvest directly from the fields around town. Land near our home was planted with cotton, hay, corn, and almonds. One day the field would be full of tall stalks of hay reaching skyward; the next day it was harvested to feed stock. The strawberry harvest was not done by machine, but by the back-breaking labor of farm workers. We reaped the benefits of their labor by consuming many flats of fresh strawberries throughout the season.

In recent weeks we have been considering the harvest reaped in our individual lives, the gifts given to us by God, the earnings of our employment, and the value of our faith nurtured by the ministry of the church. Today we bring our financial pledges for the new year as our harvest. It is a biblical custom for the people of God to bring the first fruits of the harvest as a gift to God. The biblical standard of giving to God is a tithe, 10% of what one has received. We are called to give our first fruits, the best of the crop, back to God in recognition that God is the source of all we have anyway.

In the passage from Deuteronomy today, the author is reminding the people that the good land with flowing streams on which they live, the rich harvest of wheat, barley, olives and pomegranates reaped, are gifts of God. "Eat your fill and bless the Lord your God for the good land that God has given you." He continues, saying, "Take care that you do not forget the Lord your God." Don't think that you reaped the harvest by your own power and might. God has given us the harvest we enjoy. Let us not forget that.

Christians unite the first fruits of our harvest that we might continue the ministry of Jesus Christ. We do so on a local level, as family units in a congregation contribute to the ministry of the local church. Local United Methodist churches in turn, contribute a portion of our income to others, through ministries in our annual conference of Northern California and

Nevada, our nation, and our world. Our United Methodist resources are pooled and multiplied to create orphanages, hospitals, missions, schools, missionaries, pastors, church leaders, who carry on the ministry of Jesus around the world.

Why do we do this? Why do we give our hard-earned money to the ministry of Jesus? The gifts of our individual harvests are united to create a harvest of hope for the world.

We need not go very far to recognize that our world is in desperate need of hope today. Our community has experienced much tragedy and grief in these two weeks. Our hearts are heavy as we consider the deaths of three community members, the causes of their deaths, and the impact of their deaths on many, many lives. The illusion of living in a sheltered community immune to horrific violence has been shattered. Anxiety for the well-being of children and youth of our community is tremendous. The façade of affluence no longer covers the despair that lies close to the surface for too many.

Beyond our small community there are many other people and nations aching for hope in the face of despair. Over 45 million Americans are without health care, consequently suffering needlessly or overwhelmed by debt. Today is United Nations Sunday. We are reminded that today in the developing world an estimated 1.2 billion people live on less than \$1 a day, 800 million are undernourished, and 153 million children under age 5 are underweight. An estimated 14 million children of primary age around the world are not enrolled in school, depriving one in every five children of access to even the most basic education. We are haunted by horrific stories of assault, rape, and killing in addition to starvation and deprivation of refugee camps in the ravaged nation of Sudan.

It is said that hope, by definition, needs despair to push against. We are certainly not lacking in despair. We need an abundance of hope to conquer it. We are here today because we know the source of hope. We come to receive of it ourselves and to participate in creating a harvest of hope for our community and our world.

True hope is an expensive virtue. It comes at the cost of great outlays of faith and love. Through the continuous planting of faith and love, we begin to understand hope in the long haul, hope in that existence beyond the travails of today.

Vaclav Havel, former president of Czechoslovakia, said, "Hope is not the same as joy that things are going well, or the willingness to invest in

things that are obviously headed for early success, but rather an ability to work for something because it is good.”¹

Stories on the American frontier abound with acts of kindness and goodness. We often read of men and women injured or killed in the dangerous occupation of farming, their crops left standing in the fields, neighbors and friends gathering to bring in the harvest for the widows and children. They returned, stepping out of their grain trucks to hand a young widow and her children the receipts for the grain they’d taken to the storage elevators. The harvest, in danger of being lost, instead reaped a crop of hope for a struggling family.

Hope is an investment in the things that are good. That’s the kind of investment made by the first two servants in Jesus’ parable of the talents. They were willing to take a risk, trusting that their investment would earn a profit. Their investments were rewarded, not just with earnings for their master, but they were rewarded with sharing the joy of their master. When day by day we continue to care for a loved one, stand by a friend who is distraught, mentor a student having difficulty in school we are investing in that which is good and creating hope for the long haul.

“Hope’s greatest power is that it enables the present by embracing the future....Hope connects the present to the future. It is the mother of courage, confidence, and endurance.”²

Hope is based on the experience of what God has done. Because we have known God’s activity in the past, we can trust that God will continue to be at work in the present and in the future. When we companion another through a turbulent time, we give them a glimpse of God’s presence, and they can begin to trust that God will be there always, as God has promised.

Hope is often nurtured by the small things we can do for one another, for they offer a glimpse of a better day to come, a day of healing and wholeness, a day of peace and comfort. Hope is cultivated by an attitude of appreciation for what is, not by complaint about what is not. Hope sees with the eyes of faith that all is not bleak, that there are glimmers of light in the darkness, there are steps to be taken even though the destination is unknown.

Quaker theologian/philosopher Parker Palmer once told a story about abundance. He was a passenger on a plane that pulled away from the gate, taxied to a remote corner of the field and stopped. You know the feeling: the plane stops, you look out the window, see that you’re not on the runway, the engines wind down, and your heart sinks. The pilot comes on the intercom and said, “I have some bad news and some really bad news. The

bad news is there's a storm front in the West. Denver is socked in and shut down. We've looked at the alternatives and there are none. So we'll be staying here for a few hours. That's the bad news. The really bad news is that we have no food and it's lunch time." Everybody groaned. Some passengers started to complain, some became angry. But then, Palmer said, one of the flight attendants did something amazing.

She stood up, took the intercom mike, and said, "We're really sorry, folks. We didn't plan it this way and we really can't do much about it. And I know for some of you this is a big deal. Some of you are really hungry and were looking forward to a nice lunch. Some of you may have a medical condition and really need lunch. Some of you may not care one way or the other and some of you need to skip lunch. So I'll tell you what we're going to do. I have a couple of breadbaskets up here and we're going to pass them around. I'm asking everybody to put something in the basket. Some of you brought a little snack along – something to tide you over – just in case something like this happened, some peanut butter crackers, candy bars. And some of you have a few LifeSavers or chewing gum or Roloids. And if you don't have anything edible, you have a picture of your children or spouse or girlfriend/boyfriend or a bookmark or a business card. Everybody put something in and then we'll reverse the process. We'll pass the baskets around again and everybody can take out what he/she needs."

"Well," Palmer said, "what happened next was amazing. The griping stopped. People started to root around in pockets and handbags, some got up and opened their suitcases stored in the overhead luggage racks and got out boxes of candy, a salami, a bottle of wine. People were laughing and talking. She had transformed a group of people who were focused on need and deprivation into a community of sharing and celebration. She had transformed scarcity into abundance."

After the flight, which eventually did proceed, Parker Palmer stopped on his way off the plane and said to her, "Do you know there's a story in the Bible about what you did back there? It's about Jesus feeding a lot of people with very little food."

"Yes," she said, "I know that story. That's why I did what I did."³

As we unite our blessings, as we contribute the first fruits of our own harvests, God's Spirit multiplies the blessings, creating an abundant harvest. And we, my friends, enter into the joy of our generous, faithful, loving God!

¹ Vaclav Havel, inscribed on a Christmas Card of the Kettering Foundation. Retrieved from *Homiletics Online*, October 20, 2005.

² Peter Gomes, *The Good Book: Reading the Bible with Mind and Heart* (New York: Wm. Morrow and Co., 1996), pp. 205-206.

³ John Buchanan, "Abundance," March 26, 2000, *The Fourth Presbyterian Church of Chicago Web Site*, fourthchurc.org. Quoted in *Homiletics*, November 2005, p. 29.

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