

Thanks for the wonderful harvest

Message for Sunday, October 8, 2017
by Bruce Fraser

Scripture: Psalm 126; Galatians 6:7-9

Children's Message: Psalm 126:5-6 "Those who sow in tears will reap with songs of joy."

I have something with me this morning that really is fantastic. You might even say it's one of God's great surprises. *Hold up the pine cone and see if people are skeptical.* Some of you don't look very impressed. Maybe you never thought of pine cones as being very special.

Do you know what pine cones do? *I expect someone will explain: pine cones have seeds in them, from which new pine trees can grow.* If you get a whole bunch of pine trees, you have a forest. If you have a forest, then you have a place for animals to find food and have their homes. Speaking of homes, the wood from pine trees is what we use to build our homes, too. So that makes pine cones pretty important! *Children may have even more ideas what trees are good for.*

What happens to all these wonderful things we find in a forest, if someone is careless and starts a forest fire? *This may bring up all kinds of ideas!*

It's not just that the trees are burned, but so are most of the pine cones, and they are what is needed for new trees to get started. This is where I get the idea of one of God's great surprises. There are different kinds of pine trees: White Pine, Ponderosa Pine, Red Pine, Pitch Pine, Jack Pine, and so on. The Jack Pine is the one that I'm thinking about.

The pine cone from a Jack Pine tree isn't like other pine cones. It's soaked all the way through with heavy, sticky sap. Because of that, it doesn't burn up in a forest fire. In fact, the fire *helps* it: until the fire, the Jack Pine cone is sealed tight, so that the seeds can't get out. When the fire is raging all around it, the heat melts the sticky sap, so that the pine cone opens up and the seeds can fall out. After a forest fire, if you come back to that area in a couple of years, you'll see lots of Jack Pine trees growing there. That's what I mean when I say this is one of God's great surprises. Something terrible

happens, but out of that, something good comes: new trees are born, the start of a new forest.

The same thing is true in our lives. You and I make mistakes, and bad things happen. But God is always willing to forgive us and help us start again. Even when something terrible happens, God is with us, and it's not the end. God will bring good out of every situation.

[Thanks to Harvey and Patsie Moore for this, from their book *The Mysterious Marvelous Snowflake.*]

Message: "Thanks for the wonderful harvest"

1) Thanks for the wonderful harvest

We had some wonderful tomato plants in our garden this year. The puzzling thing is, they are in the flower garden, and we didn't plant any there.

Well, we didn't purposely plant tomato seeds. What happened is that last fall, we dug our compost into the garden. This spring, tomato seeds which were in that compost germinated and grew up alongside the flowers vegetables.

That shows the proverb in action: "What you sow, you will reap." That proverb is found in the Bible. Here's how one Bible version puts it:

Galatians 6:7, New Living Translation:

Don't be misled. Remember that you can't ignore God and get away with it. You will always reap what you sow!

I underlined the word "always." It doesn't say "most of the time" or "some of the time," but "always." Count on it. It is an unbreakable law of the universe. If I plant corn seed, I'm going to harvest corn, not potatoes. If I plant apple seeds, I'll grow an apple tree, not a peach tree. No matter how much I wish it were a peach tree it will be an apple tree.

Now the Bible isn't really a textbook for Farming 101. It's a textbook for Living 101. What this passage is really about is applying that principle to life in general. Read the next verse:

Galatians 6:8, New Living Translation:

Those who live only to satisfy their own sinful desires will harvest the consequences of decay and death. But those who live to please the Spirit will harvest everlasting life from the Spirit.

Whatever you give out in life is what you're going to get back. If I cheat other people, I'm going to get cheated. God says it will happen; count on it. If I live by integrity and kindness, then I will reap a character built on those qualities. I will reap what I sow.

This principle can be applied even more broadly. It applies to the way we raise our children: "What you sow, you will reap." It applies to how we live as a church in the community: "What you sow, you will reap." It applies to the nation: "What you sow, you will reap."

2) Let us be patient while we work for the harvest

Of course, growing character takes longer than growing cucumbers. Just when you thought you were making progress in growing and maturing in the Lord, you might fall back into an old habit. Growing takes time. But our culture prizes instant gratification. We hear ads like:

- ◆ "Phone now to place your order."
- ◆ "You can enjoy it now, and don't pay a cent until 2018."

The Bible tells us to not give up, but to stay faithful in following God's way.

Galatians 6:9, New Living Translation:

So let's not get tired of doing what is good. At just the right time we will reap a harvest of blessing if we don't give up.

3) Thanks for the wonderful harvest... to come

In the Bible there is a curious passage about farmers planting and harvesting. What's odd about it is their emotions:

Psalms 126:5-6, Today's English Version:

Let those who wept as they planted their crops,
gather the harvest with joy!

Those who wept as they went out carrying the seed
will come back singing for joy, as they bring in the harvest.

I've known farmers to cry in despair when their crop, worth tens of thousands of dollars, gets beaten into the ground by hail, or burned by a hot, dry summer. But I've never seen any of you farmers

weep when it's planting time. What on earth is this passage about?

Del Tarr served as a missionary for fourteen years in the Sahel, that vast stretch of savannah more than four thousand miles wide just south of the Sahara Desert, with a climate much like the Bible lands. He wrote about his experience there.

In the Sahel, all the moisture comes in a four month period: May, June, July, and August. After that, not a drop of rain falls for eight months. The ground cracks from dryness, and so do your hands and feet. The winds off the Sahara pick up the dust and throw it thousands of feet into the air. It then comes slowly drifting across West Africa as a fine grit. It gets in your mouth. It gets inside your watch and stops it. It gets inside your refrigerator (if you have one). The year's food, of course, must all be grown in four months. People grow sorghum or milo in fields not larger than this sanctuary. Their only tools are the strength of their backs and a short handled hoe. No Massey-Fergusons here; the average annual income is between eighty-five and one hundred dollars per person.

October and November... these are beautiful months. The granaries are full - the harvest has come. People sing and dance. They eat two meals a day - one about ten in the morning, after they've been to the field awhile, and the other just after sundown. The sorghum is ground between two stones to make flour and then a mush with the consistency of yesterday's cream of wheat. The sticky mush is eaten hot; they roll it into little balls between their fingers, dip it into a bit of sauce, and then pop it into their mouths. The meal lies heavy on their stomachs so they can sleep. December comes, and the granaries start to recede. Many families omit the morning meal. Certainly by January not one family in fifty is still eating two meals a day. By February, the evening meal diminishes. People feel the clutch of hunger once again. The meal shrinks even more during March, and children succumb to sickness. You don't stay well on half a meal a day.

April is the month that haunts my memory. The African dusk is quiet, you see... no jet engines, no traffic noises to break the stillness. The dust filters down through the air, and sounds carry for long distances. April is the month you hear the babies crying in the twilight... from the village over here, from the village over there.

Their mothers' milk is now stopped. Parents go at this time of year to the bush country, where they scrape bark from certain trees. They dig up roots as well, collect leaves, and grind it all together to make a thin gruel. They may pawn a chair, a cooking pot, or bicycle tires in order to buy a little more grain from those wealthy enough to have some remaining, but most often the days are passed with only an evening cup of gruel.

Then, inevitably, it happens. A six-or seven-year-old boy comes running to his father one day with sudden excitement. "Daddy! Daddy! We've got grain!" he shouts. "Son, you know we haven't had grain for weeks." "Yes, we have!" the boy insists. "Out in the hut where we keep the goats- there's a leather sack hanging up on the wall - I reached up and put my hand down in there - Daddy, there's grain in there! Give it to Mommy so she can make flour, and tonight our tummies can sleep!" The father stands motionless. "Son, we can't do that," he softly explains. "That's next year's seed grain. It's the only thing between us and starvation. We're waiting for the rains, and then we must use it."

The rains finally arrive in May, and when they do, the young boy watches as his father takes the sack from the wall... and does the most unreasonable thing imaginable. Instead of feeding his desperately weakened family, he goes to the field and - I've seen it - with tears streaming down his face, he takes the precious seed and throws it away. He scatters it in the dirt! Why? Because he believes in the harvest. The seed is his; he owns it. He can do anything with it he wants. The act of sowing the seed hurts so much that he cries.

But as the African pastors say when they preach on Psalm 126, "Brothers and sisters, this is God's law of the harvest. Don't expect to rejoice later on unless you have been willing to sow in tears."

And I want to ask you: How much would it cost you to sow in tears? I don't mean just giving God something from your abundance, but finding a way to say, "I believe in the harvest, and therefore I will give what makes no sense. The world would call me unreasonable to do this—but I must sow regardless, in order that I may someday celebrate with songs of joy."

Some harvests come easily. This summer, with all that rain, I had a bumper crop of grass to cut every Saturday! Other harvests require a major investment of time and energy, heart and soul and prayer. And even at that, there is no guarantee of results. We do it by faith.

What are you desiring to harvest in your life, in your family, in your church, in your community? Are you willing to sow in tears, to sacrifice, to give from your very soul, to make it a reality?

If so, then I am confident that God will bless your efforts and prayers.

Next Steps:

- What kind of growth would you like to see happen:
 - in your own life?
 - in your family?
 - in the church?
 Pray about this; let God guide you and give you vision.
- Any gardener or farmer will tell you the harvest doesn't just "happen." It takes planning and effort.
- So what will you sow, in order to produce that harvest? Remember it takes time.