

Sermon: July 3, 2016 Galatians 6: 1-10
Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev. Greg Wooley

“As ye sow, so shall ye reap.” This is one of those old-fashioned scriptures you’d see in needlework on your great-aunt’s wall, and for good reason. In modern parlance we’ve loosely borrowed the language of “karma” from eastern religions, but whichever religious tradition you’re working from the message is clear: if you want good things to come your way, in this life or the next, then do good and trust the power and process of the Divine to look after the rest.

Eugene Peterson’s Bible translation, “The Message” states Paul’s agenda very clearly:

“(v.1-3) Live creatively, friends. If someone falls into sin, forgivingly restore him, saving your critical comments for yourself. You might be needing forgiveness before the day’s out. Stoop down and reach out to those who are oppressed. Share their burdens, and so complete Christ’s law. If you think you are too good for that, you are badly deceived..... (v.7-10) Don’t be misled: No one makes a fool of God. What a person plants, he will harvest. The person who plants selfishness, ignoring the needs of others—ignoring God!—harvests a crop of weeds. All he’ll have to show for his life is weeds! But the one who plants in response to God, letting God’s Spirit do the growth work in him, harvests a crop of real life, eternal life. So let’s not allow ourselves to get fatigued doing good. At the right time we will harvest a good crop if we don’t give up, or quit. Right now, therefore, every time we get the chance, let us work for the benefit of all.”

Pretty much everyone, whether urban or rural, understands the basics of planting a seed and harvesting a crop: what you sow – what kind of seed – will determine what you harvest. How you sow – whether you properly prepare the soil, whether you understand the optimal spacing and depth for that kind of seed – will determine how well it germinates. And how you tend the seedlings – weeding, pest control, supplemental watering – is fussy, ongoing work that will go a long way to determining your yield.

Pretty much everyone also understands that in spite of our best efforts, the key determinant in all of it are things traditionally understood to be under God’s control: the amount and timing of sunshine and precipitation, how early you get the first killing frost, the damaging power of hail. In the way it portrays the intersection between human interaction and the power of forces larger than ourselves (whether interpreted as the power of nature or the power of the holy), it’s hard to imagine a better general analogy for life.

In all areas of life, we see the truth of Paul’s words about what we sow directly impacting what we reap - the initial inputs will have a lot to do with how healthy we will be in the various aspects of life: physical, emotional, spiritual, relational, and political.

I scarcely need to comment on our physical health. Whether it’s realizing that loading up on refined sugar and artificial colorants while playing 18 hours a day on a game console might not be the best thing for a child, or those of us in the second half of life facing up to the realities of processed foods, bad cholesterol and sedentary lifestyles, the phrase “garbage in, garbage out” is so very true in the way we treat our bodies. While there are many diseases and conditions that have nothing to do with what we put in to our bodies – and we must never play “blame the victim” when we or someone else receives a tough diagnosis – there are many instances where the things we take into our bodies, and how active or inactive we are, are great predictors of physical health or the lack thereof.

Same goes for our emotional health. The way we think about people and situations will shape the way we respond to the world. If we plant seeds of suspicion and fear, that’s what will come to flower later on. If we plant seeds of optimism and gratitude, the crop will look quite different. Much like the cautionary note regarding physical health, there are also mental illnesses quite unrelated to our thoughts and attitudes so it’s not a simple straight line, but this much is clear: nobody every GAINED anything by brooding on negative thoughts.

What about spiritual health? Do we take time to breathe deeply, to meditate, to ponder, to release our worries, or do we allow the demands of the day and the always-pinging smartphone to convince us that we need to be on the job 24-7-365? Whether our spiritual discipline takes the shape of prayer or Bible Study, or swinging a hammer at a Habitat for Humanity build or helping out at Monday night Food &

Friends, setting time aside to just be with God is as important as regular watering of a garden rather than letting it get sunbaked and desolate.

Body – Mind – Spirit – all are aspects of life governed by “as ye sow, so shall ye reap.” So are our relationships. If we see life as “all about me”, people will eventually be repelled by the selfishness. If we neglect our primary relationships, they won’t just look after themselves. We need to be careful about our inputs if we want a healthy harvest.

That’s how it works as we relate to people we know and love. But the kind of relational health that Paul was encouraging in the Galatian Church was bigger than that. He called them to trust the seed they had been given in the good news of Jesus Christ, and then to do the hard work of tilling and weeding and watering out there in the mission field, giving practical assistance and words of encouragement to those in need. In essence he was calling them to the “all my relations” attitude we looked at last week, approaching the world around us as our kin.

In our Mission Statement here at Ralph Connor, we have identified these seeds:

Ralph Connor Memorial United Church's Mission as a Church Community is:

- to nurture the spiritual exploration and growth of all our members and adherents;
- to be an intentionally inviting Christian community that seeks, welcomes and embraces new members;
- to reach out and become an agent for social justice in our neighbourhood and in the global community.

What a great starting point for us as a congregation as we strive to reach out in Christ's name. These words point us toward relational health, and initiatives like the new Youth and Young Adult project give us the opportunity to put those words into actions.

There is one more aspect of this that I would like to explore this morning, and it's a bit harder to get at because it comes from a completely different perspective. For lack of a better term I'm going to call it our “political health”

As someone who lives a pretty comfortable life, I have the luxury of viewing the Bible as a book containing lots of metaphors and figurative language. I can stay a bit aloof from its promises, keeping a safe academic distance that I can control. But for those living in chronic, enforced poverty, Christ's compassion for the poor and marginalized is no mere metaphor for something else, it's an absolute lifeline that may very well be my only source of hope. If my life consists of working all day every day, so that somebody else lives in luxury while my children go to sleep hungry, and then I read these words in the Bible about sowing seeds and reaping harvests, you better believe that a time will come when I start asking why the seeds I plant always turn into somebody else's harvest.

Back in the 1920s, a number of African American academics were starting to ask these questions. I rarely quote poetry in a sermon but I'd like to read you a work called, “A Black Man talks of reaping” by Arna Bontemps which speaks powerfully of sowing and reaping. Keep in mind that this was written about 60 years after the Emancipation proclamation of 1863, and about 40 years before the US Civil Rights Act of 1964 as you hear this take on sowing and reaping:

A BLACK MAN TALKS OF REAPING – Arna Bontemps

I have sown beside all waters in my day. I planted deep, within my heart the fear
that wind or fowl would take the grain away. I planted safe against this stark, lean year.

I scattered seed enough to plant the land in rows from Canada to Mexico
but for my reaping only what the hand can hold at once is all that I can show.

Yet what I sowed and what the orchard yields my brother's sons are gathering stalk and root;
small wonder then my children glean in fields they have not sown, and feed on bitter fruit.

Here there is both lament for the injustice of his day and a not-too-subtle warning that the underclass isn't going to take it forever. I hear that lament and wonder if we have learned nothing in the 90 years since then. Back in the 1920s, the interconnections between race and class and power and poverty were identified as things that needed to change – yet in the world of today, the voices that are getting the most attention are the disrespectful ones, who try to make us afraid of people whose homeland or language or religion or skin tone are different from our own. And I'm not just talking about you-know-who south of the border (Donald Trump) but also about the anti-immigrant talk prior to the Brexit vote in the UK, the extreme discourse in Austria who, I hear, need to re-do their presidential vote, and then there's the terrifying fear-based rhetoric of ISIS, punctuated by explosions like the one in Baghdad this weekend. There is a growing nastiness and intolerance in our world, coming from all sides, and at times it is hard to know how to make things better. What seeds can we possibly sow, what harvest can we realistically hope for, as we strive for a world where real-live harvests are shared more equitably among the have and have-not nations?

Some words of hope come from my childhood hero Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. In a speech given in March 1968 at a High School in Michigan, Dr. King said these words, referencing both the image of sowing and reaping, and his familiar "I have a dream" speech from five years earlier:

"However difficult it is to continue to live with the agony and the continued existence of racism, however difficult it is to live amidst the constant hurt, the constant insult and the constant disrespect, I can still sing we shall overcome. We shall overcome because the arc of the moral universe is long but it bends towards justice...we shall overcome because the Bible is right [when it says] 'You shall reap what you sow.' With this faith we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair, a stone of hope. With this faith we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood. With this faith we will be able to speed up the day when all of God's children all over this nation - black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old negro spiritual, "Free at Last, Free at Last, Thank God Almighty, We are Free At Last."

I pray that the spirit of those words – echoing no less than the apostle Paul and his trust in what happens when we truly follow Christ, the author of hope, the liberator of all who live in bondage – will somehow find their way back into the public arena. Our current practice of rewarding the most disrespectful voices in politics, in entertainment, in media commentary, just has to stop. If we keep sowing those poisonous seeds, and then eagerly fertilizing them, the harvest will have no choice but to be bitter. There is no need to put that seed in the ground, let alone tend and water it; the message of courageous love, of radical inclusion, needs to be planted by all people of good will to counter this global wave of bombastic hatred.

Two thousand years ago, the apostle Paul faced up to his opponents with brilliant words that have stood the test of time: "as you sow, so shall you reap". This is true in our bodies, our emotions, our spirits, our relationships and our politics. Friends in Christ, trust in the seed of love and reconciliation, trust in the liberating power of Christ Jesus, and work hard for that harvest. Trust in the abundance that has been promised, abundance in this life and in life beyond life. We don't do the growing – that part is God's job to do – but our commitment to the process, and our belief in Christ's unfailing love, is the place for us to start. Amen.

References cited:

Bontemps, Arna. "A Black Man Talks of Reaping". <http://www.poetryoutloud.org/poem/176999>

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Further reading:

Cullen, Countee. "From the Dark Tower". Another 1920s poem from Harlem. <http://genius.com/Countee-cullen-from-the-dark-tower-annotated>

King, Martin Luther Jr. "I have a dream" speech, Washington DC, August 28, 1963. <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlkihadream.htm>