

“Sowing and Reaping: We Can't Do It Alone”

Today we're in the final week of a series we've been calling “Sowing and Reaping.” It's based upon the apostle Paul's words, in Galatians, chapter six, where he says, “Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows.”

Paul is telling us that there's this spiritual law (God has put into place) that is always at work. It's one of the “givens” in life that's good for us to know (and understand) as we go through life. What you plant is what you reap. What you put into the ground is what comes out of the ground. It's the way things work.

In week one, we talked about how there's this “cumulative effect” when it comes to the things we plant. There's a gradual building up, a gradual adding onto, not all at once, not one big event, but a little at a time, and (with enough time) that eventually (over time) have a tendency to shape who we become.

All of the decisions we made (years ago), the habits we developed, the behaviors we lived out that seemed like they were (no big deal) have all worked together to determine where we are today. In the same way, all of the decisions we make today, the habits we develop today, the behaviors we live out today are going to have a big influence on what the future looks like.

Now, we recognized (and acknowledged) that there are exceptions to this rule. No one can predict with certainty what's going to happen. If you do this (in life), that won't always follow. Bad things happen to good people. Good things happen to bad people. (We see it all the time.) The seeds we plant are no guarantee.

What is guaranteed is this law God has built into the world; this spiritual law he wants us to understand. You cannot fool God. You cannot mock what God says (in life) and end up on top. You're not going to win. Eventually it catches up. What always wins are his promises. What always catches up (and pays off) is a life faithful to his Word.

Last week we talked about how it's the little things in life that make the difference. Sometimes it's the big things, but (most often) it's the little things.

Seeds of anger lead to broken relationships. Seeds of greed lead to discontentment and unfulfilled dreams. Seeds of passivity (in life) lead to a life filled with regret. The little things (over time) have a tendency to add up.

In the same way (in contrast), seeds of encouragement lead to relationships that are strong. Seeds of thankfulness lead to a life filled with joy. Seeds of respect lead to a harvest of respect, because what you sow (in your life) is what you will reap in your life. What you plant is what you are going to harvest.

We talked about how the little things (in life) are often times the things that are easy to do, and easy not to do. Those are the things that (more often) than not, make the difference.

It's easy to pass on that cup of expensive coffee and put the money (you didn't spend) into savings. It's easy to do that. It's also easy not to do that. It's easy to get up fifteen minutes earlier each day and read your Bible, spend time talking with God. Anybody can do that. It's easy to do that. It's also easy not to do that. It's these little things in life that often make the big difference.

And so, we asked the question, last week, “Is this law of sowing and reaping working for me or against me? Am I leveraging what I know God has promised, or am I fighting it and living as if it's not true?”

It doesn't matter if you wanted apple trees. If you've planted pears trees, that's what you'll end up with. It doesn't matter if you wanted a good and a healthy marriage. If you never put in the time and the effort, don't be surprised when it doesn't happen. Good grades require homework. Strong friendships and relationships take work. The seed won't grow until it's planted. The harvest will never come if you fail to put the seed into the ground.

We also said (last week), from this law of sowing and reaping, that (more often than not) you end up reaping more than you sow. When you plant an apple seed in the ground, you don't end up with just one apple. You end up with many apples, and from those (many apples) more seeds, and from those (more seeds) more

trees. And it can work spiritually as well as it does physically, it work for you or against you, and that's what God wants us to know.

Today I want to take this in (bit of a) different direction. We've been focusing (primarily) in these first two weeks on what happens in our lives (individually) as we either plant or (fail to plant) the right seeds. What I want to do today is turn this a bit and help us think through how this same spiritual "sowing and reaping" law is also true for us as a faith community, and how, in the same way as what happens in our (individual lives), this law can either work for us or against us in our life together.

What I also want to do is to make sure we don't lose sight of how this all happens, of what makes this all happen, and who it is that brings about the growth we all want to see.

In our readings today, we heard a number of passages from the Bible. It's interesting how the Bible comes at this same spiritual law from a number of different directions.

We started in the Old Testament, in those books written before Jesus was born. In Isaiah (chapter 55), and these are really God's words to us and not the prophet's. He says, "As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth: it will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it."

In other words, (the prophet says) there's a predictable law God has put into place, when it comes to way things work in this world. (It's similar to what Paul says.) Just as the rain and snow water the earth and (as a result) bring about a physical harvest (in life), so God's Word will bring about a spiritual harvest in the lives of those in whom it is planted. It's a law you can count on. It's a spiritual law on which you can build.

Now, think back to where (and when) it all started. In Genesis (chapter one) in creation, how was the world brought into being? (It's the same thing.) It was by the Word of God. And God said, "Let there be light and there was light. Let there be plants and trees and there were plants and trees." God spoke...and it happened. God said it...and it came about. God's Word has that power. God's voice is what makes it work.

Now, from there, fast forward to the life of Jesus, it's the same thing. All of his miracles, all of his power, all of what he did, how did it happen? (Jesus said) "Take up your mat and walk, and the man took up his mat and he walked." (Jesus said) "Be healed of your disease and the woman, who had been bleeding for years, was made whole." (Jesus said), "Go out of him, be gone; and the man who had been tormented by demons (his entire life) was set free."

How did it happen (in creation)? It happened by the power and the Word of God. How did it happen (in Jesus' ministry)? It happened by the power and the Word he spoke.

Now, take what we just said and lay it alongside what we've been saying. Sowing and reaping; planting and harvesting, what goes into the ground is what comes out of the ground?

Do you think it's any different in the church? Do you think God would change how he works (in this world), when it comes to what he chooses to do (or not to do) in and through us?

It's the power of God's Word that makes it happen. It's the Spirit working through what's spoken (and shared) that changes lives. When God's Word is spoken, faith has a chance to grow and become real. When God's Word is shared, that's when the Spirit begins to work and people are drawn to Christ.

But it's the same principle as with apples and pears. The seed won't grow until it's planted. The harvest will never come if you fail to put the seed into the ground.

If you want apple trees, you need to plant apple seeds. If we want faith to develop and this place (we know as St. Timothy's) to grow, we need to be planting seeds (of God's Word) everywhere we go. At work, at school, among your friends, on Facebook; we need to become known (in the community) as a seed-planting church. That's what needs to happen. If the harvest that comes from the planted seed is ever going to take place, we need to develop that kind of reputation (outside of these walls).

Now, hang on to that thought and think about the next passage we read. (This is important stuff.) Paul's first letter to the church in Corinth; the Corinthians were an interesting bunch. In fact, if I were asked to interview there (as a pastor), if it were up to me, (if I received the call), I would probably decline the call. That church had all kinds of problems.

One of the problems (they had) was the divisions (that existed) within the body. They were arguing (all the time) about which of their leaders was the best. Do you remember what Paul said? He said, "Apollos and Paul, what are you doing?" (He said), "What is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you

came to believe.” (And then he said), “I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow. So, neither the one who plants, or the one who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow.”

What’s Paul telling us? What he’s telling us is that the growth of the seed doesn’t depend on us. The one who makes the seed grow is God. He’s the one who brings about the harvest. The one who turns apple seeds into apples, seeds of faith into a life committed to Jesus...it’s not us, but it’s him. It’s not you and me, but it’s God.

It doesn’t depend on us. It’s not up to us. What does depend on us is the seed-planting. What is up to us is taking the seed out of the bag and putting it into the ground.

That’s what the story (Jesus told) was all about. Matthew 13, the Sower and the seed. What happened in the story? The Sower went out to sow. (That’s what he did.) He took the seed and he planted it in the ground.

In fact, if you read the story (carefully), he didn’t even do that. What he did was he scattered it wherever he went. That’s what he did. He just took it out of his bag and started throwing it, and he didn’t even care where it landed.

Some of it landed on the path and the birds came and ate it. (It didn’t matter.) Some of it landed on rocky places (and it started growing) but, because it was only rocks, it withered and died. (Who cares?) Some of it fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked out the plants. (It happens in life; so what?) Still other seed (Jesus said) fell on good soil, where it produced a crop – a hundred, sixty, or thirty times what was sown.” (Now, it’s getting good.) And then he says, “He who has ears, let him hear.”

Now, let me ask you a question. What’s the point of the story? What does Jesus want us to hear? The Sower and the seed? The Word of God that gets planted in people’s hearts? (What’s the point?)

Go out and find good soil (and when you find it) start sowing seeds? (That’s not the story.) No, not at all! In fact, it’s the opposite. In the story, the sower didn’t care what kind of soil it was. (He didn’t.) How come? Because the growth (of the seed) wasn’t up to him; that was not his job. His only job was to scatter the seed; to take it out of his bag and to start tossing it. (That was his job.)

In the story, it’s almost like it didn’t matter where it landed. It’s almost like the Sower didn’t even know where it would land, what kind of soil was there when it was thrown. All he did was throw it. All he did was scatter the seed he had.

What’s Jesus telling us? He’s telling us the growth of the seed isn’t up to us. The growth of the seed is up to him. What happens when the seed gets planted is not ours to control. In fact, it’s beyond our control. We can’t control what happens.

That’s why (as we’ve been saying) there are no guarantees in life. Bad things do happen to good people. Good things do happen to people who are bad. There are no guarantees. What is guaranteed is the promise God makes. What does happen (whenever the seed gets planted) is that God is at work to lead people to Christ.

On the path, maybe all that happens is that when the birds come and eat it, as they’re eating it, the surface of the path gets scratched away (and loosened), so it’s more receptive to the seed next time it falls.

In the rocks, maybe all that happens is that the seed, before it dies, it puts just one more crack into the stone, so the next seed has a better chance of making it.

Among the thorns, who knows what happens among the thorns? It’s that other story (Jesus told) of the weeds and the wheat; maybe the seed will make it and it will grow, but because there are so many thorns (and weeds) around it, we just don’t see it. It’s still there.

And then, on the good soil, did you hear what Jesus promised? Thirty, sixty, one hundred times what was planted. It just kept on growing. No one saw it coming. (It just happened.) But when it happened, it really happened, and when it started happening, it couldn’t stop.

Now, let me ask you another question. “He who has ears, let him hear.” Raise your hand if you have ears. Now, raise your other hand if you believe Jesus is speaking to us. Me, too! He’s speaking to us.

This isn’t about the way it worked back then, when Jesus was here and walking on this earth. It’s the way it works today, because he’s still here and he’s walking with us. And his promise hasn’t changed. His word to us has the same power today as it did when it was first spoken. That’s what he wants us to hear.

Now, put it all together and what do we get? Sowing and reaping, what you plant is what you harvest; if it doesn’t go into the ground, it’ll never come out of the ground. God’s Word has the power. Jesus’ words are what make it happen.

Paul and Apollos? It's not up to them, it's up to God. It's not about them, it's about him. The Sower and the seed. It doesn't matter where it lands. All that matters is that the seed comes out of the bag and gets scattered. When that happens, it all starts to happen. When that happens, the Word of God has a chance.

Open your ears. That's what Jesus is saying. Take the seed you've been given and start throwing it. (It doesn't matter where you throw it.) We have in (our bags) what the world will never find in its. We have the seed that can change the hard and the rocky and the weed-infested hearts (and lives) of the people we know into good and productive and harvest-producing soil.

Jesus died on the cross. He was raised from the dead. Our sins are forgiven. In him is the promise of life. But it will never happen, unless it happens. It will never happen, if the seed (we've been given) stays in the bag...And so, (Jesus says), "He who has ears...start scattering."

Let me close with this. Since a week ago (this past Wednesday), the day my mother died, I've been doing a good amount of reflecting and soul-searching and thinking about how quickly life can come and go, and be gone. I've also been thinking about how one generation moves on and the next one takes its place.

In my case, both my mom and my dad have now died, and the next generation to die (in our family) is not theirs, but mine. That's got my attention (this past week); I'm next in line.

The other piece that has got my attention is how this whole "sowing and reaping" thing works in the church, and how what (we do in the church) has an eternal impact for the kingdom. I don't want to overstate this, because countless people shared in the work, and countless times and circumstances and efforts (over the years) came into play. And finally (as we've been saying), the growth isn't up to us, but to God. It all falls on him.

But the generation that started this church (and Christian Academy) are moving on. And now it's up to those of us still here. They are no longer here, but we are. The seed they were given was thrown out, and much of it (as far as we know) did nothing; it withered and died. But some of it took root, and (when it did), it all started to happen; and just look at what's happened. It really happens. Now it's up to us. Now it falls on us.

The good news is that it's not all up to us and it doesn't all fall on us. It's finally up to him, and it all falls on him. But the seed needs to come out of the bag. It needs to get scattered and thrown. Amen.