

Sowing And Reaping

I love tomato plants.

To me, few things are as lush and beautiful as a full-grown tomato plant in mid-summer.

Nothing seems to grow as fast, either.

You can plant a five inch seedling on Memorial Day, and have a four foot tall tomato plant with green tomatoes on it by the 4th of July.

Of course the best thing about a tomato plant is that it produces tomatoes.

Home-grown tomatoes are the chief culinary delight of my life.

Every June and July I take great pleasure in looking forward to the tomatoes I'll be eating in August and September.

There can be great joy in sowing and reaping.

There are few certainties in life, but one that you can depend on is that in order to reap, you have to sow.

Another certainty is that you will reap exactly what you sow and nothing else.

You don't sow a cucumber seed and get roses or lilies: you sow a cucumber seed—you get cucumbers.

There is an organic logic designed by God that applies to all things: you sow seeds for a thorn bush, you get thorns; you sow seeds for a fruit tree, you get fruit.

You reap exactly what you sow.

In today's Epistle lesson from the sixth chapter of *Galatians*, Paul says that this logic applies to our spiritual life as well.

"A man reaps what he sows. The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction; the one who sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life."

What are the seeds we sow to please our sinful nature?

What are the seeds we sow to please the Spirit?

What's the difference?

Well, if you'll bear with me I'll try a unique way of trying to explain.

Let's begin by asking the question: who exactly am I?

There are a lot of different ways we can answer that question.

I'm the person who looks out at the world through my own two eyes.

I'm a person who knows I am alive, that I exist.

As Descartes famously said, "I think, therefore I am."

There are certain things I know about myself.

I know that there is something called good, and something called bad and that I am capable of both—of doing good and bad things, of saying good and bad things and of thinking good and bad thoughts.

I've known this since I have been a child because God wrote this knowledge in my heart.

I know that this is not only true of me, but of all people.

I also know that even though I want to do what is good I frequently do what is bad—even though when I do what is bad it makes me feel bad.

So I wonder why I think and say and do bad things when they make me feel bad.

Why don't I always want to do what is good so I can feel good?

What is there in me that makes me want to do things that make me feel bad?

Are you with me?

If you can identify with that child-like reasoning, you are ready to understand what it is that makes you do the things you wish you didn't do—and learn what you can do about it.

First of all let's put a name on what I've been referring to as "I": let's call it "my self."

My self is more or less identical with my personality--something I started to acquire at a very early age.

Now the problem with “my self” is that it is not a very nice person.

My self tends to look out for my self and to think, say and do things that are good for my self.

There’s a name for that: it’s called sin-and you and I were born with it.

We didn’t ask for it but we got it and like a virus it infects every cell of our body.

That’s not good news, but it’s the truth and we need to deal with it.

When the Bible talks about what I’ve called “my self” it typically uses terms like “flesh” and “sinful nature.”

It’s where we spend a good deal of our conscious time.

What seeds do we sow to please “myself”?

What else? Seeds of self-indulgence; seeds that will produce fruits that seem pleasurable to our sinful nature.

Seeds like indulging in those pleasant fictions the Bible calls lies.

Seeds like flirting with sexual fantasies that the Bible calls lust.

Seeds like nursing our anger against someone which the Bible calls murder.

And what do we reap from sowing these seeds?

That’s easy: the person who sows lies ends up having difficulty recognizing the truth, even when it stares him in the face.

The person who sows lust ends up jaded or impotent and incapable of any sexual pleasure at all.

The one who sows anger ends up bitter and consumed with his own anger.

Jesus’ opinion of “my self” and its self-serving ways is clear: “my self” needs to be murdered and the sooner we do it the better.

“If anyone would come after me he must first deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For he who seeks to save his life will lose it, but he who gives up his life for my sake and the sake of the Gospel, will find it.”

Fine and good, we say, but there’s a problem.

How does “myself” commit suicide, when it loves itself so much?

The answer is: it doesn’t.

My self can’t kill my self.

It needs someone else to do the job; someone stronger than itself.

And that someone is God—God the Holy Spirit Whom God the Father and God the Son sent to dwell in us when we were baptized.

God the Holy Spirit—Whom Jesus calls “the counselor”—is a sworn enemy of “my self.”

He wants to make you into a new person, a person who loves doing good and hates doing bad.

He alone can do this and He alone will do it—if we will let Him.

And that is where sowing to please the Spirit comes in.

How do we sow to please the Spirit—that is, to enable the Spirit to weaken and ultimately kill the sinful nature?

Paul answers that question with his very next words: *“Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.”*

At this point we are brought face to face with a spiritual truth which tends to make us Lutherans uncomfortable.

Works do count—as a matter of fact, they count a lot.

Not as payments offered up in hopes of receiving a reward, but as seeds planted in expectation of reaping a harvest.

As Luther put it, we should walk among our good deeds as in a paradise of God.

When we “plant” good deeds, we are seeding this new paradise which will yield fruit that is pleasing to the Holy Spirit.

So let’s talk about what these “good deeds” that we sow are.

We often tend to think of them as what you might call extraordinary good works: philanthropic works like contributing large sums of money to build a hospital.

But that would mean that only rich people can do good works.

Jesus gives us a very simply definition of what a good work is: He simply says, “Love one another as I have loved you,” and “Carry each other’s burdens.” Love—Biblical love—is doing for others what you would have them do for you.

Biblical love is loving others in truth and action.

It can be a simple word of sympathy or praise.

It can be a telephone call to someone who is sick.

It can be a visit to someone in a nursing home.

It is usually involves an investment of time rather than money.

Sometimes it’s just a matter of “attitude adjustment.”

Instead of raging against political leaders I despise, it’s praying to God to keep them safe and healthy and enable them to rule wisely and honorably.

Instead of watching an R-rated movie on television, it’s spending some quality time in God’s Word.

When you wake up in the morning it’s saying “Good morning, Lord!”—rather than “Good Lord, it’s morning.”

Every time we practice Biblical love in those ways, we sow seeds to please the Spirit and allow Him to reduce the strength of our sinful flesh and draw “my self” closer to his grave.

We should treasure that kind of dying because it’s a death that unites us with Christ.

As we sing in a contemporary hymn entitled *“Knowing You,”* “*Oh to know the power of your risen life and to know You in Your sufferings. To become like you in your death, my Lord, so with You to live and never die.*”

We don't like to think about death.

We don't like to talk about death. Death's a downer, a categorical negative.

We deal with it when we have to, but we'd rather stay away from it—and we pray it will stay away from us.

But there's a holy kind of dying that we do every day, and it's nothing we need fear or avoid.

As a matter of fact, we ought to welcome it and rejoice in it: our self is dying so that our soul can come alive.

Little by little, we begin to desire what He desires for us.

Little by little we begin to hate what he hates: not victims of the enemy, but the enemy himself.

Little by little, our soul becomes united with the will of the Holy Spirit.

Little by little we begin to rejoice that our old self is dying and our soul is coming alive—in Him, through Him, and with Him.

Gradually He becomes our all in all, the alpha and omega of our faith, our hope and our love: He becomes our very life.

It's a radical move, the move from the kingdom of this world to the Kingdom of God—from the kingdom of "my self" to the kingdom of the Holy Spirit.

It frightens us at first because we prefer the familiar to the unfamiliar, even when what is familiar is not so hot: "Better the devil you know," we like to say.

Jesus made it crystal clear just how radical a move it is when he said, *"If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters—yes, even his own life—he cannot be my disciple."*

In today's Gospel lesson He says, *"No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God."*

You can live and move and have your being in one kingdom or the other, but you cannot inhabit both.

In the upside down world of the Kingdom of God, the move from death to life turns out to be a move from life to death.

From walking by the old self to walking by the Spirit.

It's a radical move—but one that we who are gathered here this morning are all destined to make—sooner or later.

In another organic metaphor, Jesus said that the Kingdom of God was like a mustard seed—the smallest of seeds which grows into a large bush within us.

God sowed that mustard seed in our hearts when we were baptized, and it grows in us every day.

He has done the sowing that makes our sowing possible.

Because he sowed divine seed in us, we can sow divine seed among each other.

Because he died for us, we can die to this world and rejoice in our dying.

Because he rose from the dead, we shall rise with him.

As a matter of fact, we're rising with him right now.

Amen.

