

Home for the Harvest
 Reading from the Old Testament: Amos 9:13-14
 Reading from the New Testament: John 4:27-42

Well, my cousins sold their cows ... and they're going to Hawaii!
 Rarely have I been as excited about someone else's vacation. While it is true that vacationing in the Aloha state would be big for anyone, it would be nearly impossible to exaggerate how big a deal this is for my cousins. You see, they have been dairy farmers for over forty years and dairy farmers don't do vacations; don't take a day off. The cows are waiting. Twice a day, every day. Winter, Summer, Spring, and Fall.

I may have shared with you that after my uncle's funeral last year, by the time I returned to my cousin's house, Ned was already changed and heading out the door for the evening milking ... in the pouring rain ... for the next four hours ... twice a day ... every day ... every season ... every holiday ... rain ... drought ... sleet ... tornado warning ... twice a day ... every day ... herd them to the barn ... hook 'em up ... feed 'em ... milk 'em ... take 'em back to the field. And then, go to work harrowing, plowing, planting, fertilizing, irrigating, repairing equipment, bailing hay, harvesting corn, draining the tanks into the trucks from the dairy ... pulling the tractor out of a ditch ...

mending fences ... forecasting weather ... come in after dark ... get up before dawn to go out and do it all over again ... on a budget that's tighter than a tube top stretched across a tractor tire. My cousins sold their cows ... and they are going to Hawaii! How can you not be thrilled for them?

Your spouse, significant other, or roommate calls and asks you to pick up a gallon of milk or a loaf of bread on your way home, and you run into the Teeter, grab gallon or loaf, dash to the checkout, and complain about the people who have too many items in the express aisle ... but you probably seldom ponder the scale of the work or the innumerable hours of effort required to get the milk and bread into your hands so that you can grouse about the wait in the checkout line.

Daniel Webster said, "When tillage begins, other arts follow. The farmers, therefore, are the founders of human civilization." You may fancy yourself a gardener, but you probably haven't sweated a season when the price of soybeans is less than what it costs to harvest them. Botanist Henri Alain observed that, "Life on a farm is a school of patience; you can't hurry the crops or make an ox in two days." Similarly, it was America's favorite cowpoke, Will Rogers, who declared

that “The farmer has to be an optimist, or he wouldn't still be a farmer.” The farmers know that they are a part of something larger than themselves and that their efforts are for the good of all.

So, it comes as no surprise that the vocabulary of agriculture finds rich use in scripture. In addition to seeds, soils, and sowers, we find hints of the divine explained through fig trees and mustard plants; wheat, tares, and sheaves, the fruit of the vine and the flour for the bread, shepherds keeping their sheep, ranchers taking cattle to water on the Sabbath.

In Leviticus, setting forth a vision for life in a promised land, the Lord tells the wandering Israelites, “I will give you your rains in their season, and the land shall yield its produce, and the trees of the field shall yield their fruit. Your threshing shall overtake the vintage, and the vintage shall overtake the sowing; you shall eat your bread to the full, and live securely in your land.” And in Matthew’s gospel, Jesus mixes his agricultural metaphors to provide the budding church its mission, “When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, “The harvest is plentiful, but

the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest."

Of course, one reason for the plethora of agricultural images in the Bible is simply context. Any writer knows that if they want the reader to comprehend the point they are making, they must construct a connection between their thesis and the lives their readers know and live. So, in a pre-industrial, agriculturally driven world, the writer, speaker, or savior was not going to rely on the over-the-top platitudes, tired clichés, and tortured terminology of the National Football League that will assault your ears if you turn on your TV today. On the other hand, plows, crop yields, the shearing of sheep, threshing floors, and granaries would find immediate and personal resonance among those earliest audiences of the Gospel's narrative.

Yet, even more significantly, the agricultural images of the Bible remain timeless because of the deep, profound, and essential connection between the land and life. "Then God said, 'Let the earth put forth vegetation: plants yielding seed, and fruit trees of every kind on earth that bear fruit with the seed in it.' And it was so ... And God saw that it was good."

The farmer, the rancher, the hunter-gatherer, the arborist, and the botanist appreciate the crucial and often precarious connection between the earth we inhabit and the life we live; and they understand what we so often take for granted in a GrubHub, DoorDash world. It is not a coincidence that we refer to God as our Sustainer while simultaneously, we know we cannot live without a sustainable food supply. When Jesus broke bread and said, "This is my body. Take eat ... This cup is my blood ... Take and drink it ... Do this in remembrance of me," he acknowledged the same. In the world God created ... with the resources God provided ... we are fed by God's bounty and we live lives that find meaning in relationships that God makes possible; that God waters and tends.

Jesus instructs his disciples and his future church, "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work. Do you not say, 'Four months more, then comes the harvest'? But I tell you, look around you, and see how the fields are ripe for harvesting. ... For here the saying holds true, 'One sows and another reaps.' I sent you to reap that for which you did not labor. Others have labored, and you have entered into their labor."

Here, Jesus welds the work of the farmer to the work of the church: Both are charged with nurturing, feeding, tending, sharing what God has given. Imagine being present in John's nascent church as these words were read. A couple of generations removed from the days Jesus walked the shores of Galilee, John's congregation was doing the same thing we do here today – worship the Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer of all life, take seriously the proverb that faith seeks understanding.

We seek, search, and study, gathering around a text with expectant spirits, listening for the Holy Spirit to speak afresh the Word of Jesus so that we may perceive Christ's presence, hear Christ's voice, respond to Christ's call, follow Christ's lead, and serve as Christ's ambassadors to Christ's world; thus joining with the saints of ages past in the ongoing witness of Christ's church. Jesus tells his disciples as John tells his readers, "Others have labored, and you have entered into their labor."

Jesus, here, not only tells us what to do, but his instructions are framed by a personal encounter through which Jesus and then John show us how we are to do it.

Now, any student of the history of the Middle East will tell you that the land and its people have rarely known a time without bitter rivalries, intractable power struggles, deep wounds, and festering tribal, ethnic, religious, and racial animosities. In the days of Jesus' ministry, the region of Galilee where Jesus taught and recruited disciples was separated from the region of Jerusalem and Judah where Jesus was born and later crucified, by Samaria. During the centuries before Christ's birth as various powers, princes, and principalities fought for control of Israel, the Israelites in the north were subjected to an exile in Assyria, while the Israelites in the south were later subjected to an exile in Babylon.

But not everybody was sent away and the northerners who remained were given permission/assistance by Alexander the Great to build a temple on Mt. Gerizim, near Jacob's well, in Samaria. Well, this did not sit well at all with the heirs of Ezra who had returned from Babylon intent on rebuilding Jerusalem's temple and establishing it as the central and sole sacred space for the people of Israel. And so, a rivalry was born exceeding the magnitude of Carolina/Duke, Alabama/Auburn, Red Sox/Yankees, and Cardinals/Cubs combined. The

Jerusalem crowd and to a certain extent, the Galilean crowd looked upon the Samaritans as less than, as unclean, as unfit for worship. There were Galileans traveling to Jerusalem who would intentionally detour around Samaria to avoid the risk of interaction.

And guess what? The whole Gospel narrative is structured by the journey Jesus would take from Galilee to Jerusalem and the cross. In John's Gospel the distance between Galilee and Jerusalem is a journey Jesus would take on several occasions. So, what's Jesus going to do? Dis the Samaritans, insult them via Twitter-fit or Facebook, follow the herd on the tour of the self-righteous around Samaritan territory?

To the surprise of some and the dismay of many, Jesus ignored all of that tortured and toxic history along with all its arbitrary rules, fatuous attitudes, petty prejudices, and hidebound traditions; and instead, Jesus goes straight to the heart of Samaria and Jacob's well, on the very mountain that was home to the very temple at the center of the conflict between Jews and Samaritans. And with intention and purpose and honesty Jesus there enters into conversation and friendship with, get this, a Samaritan (*strike one*) woman (*strike two*) who was an outsider even in the eyes of the Samaritans (*strike three*). And their

conversation was real, not like the superficial drivel of snooty affluence or the guarded niceties of the people who want to seem approachable and engaged without actually being so. No, their conversation was deep, going right to the heart of life's truly big questions about value and values, priorities and principles; the kind of conversation that can actually puncture prejudice and promote understanding, even friendship.

You know what Jesus was doing? He was doing church. He was showing us how to do church. Jesus was literally demonstrating for us how to be the church; or, at least how the church is supposed to be. Far too often the larger church chooses the self-righteous route around Samaria, being so catty about who is worthy of their association. Well, Jesus isn't standing for any of that. In spite of anyone's problems or past, Jesus will not fail to see their potential.

Just think about it. The Samaritan was alone in the very place where the larger community gathers for connection, for the sharing among friends, for networking and planning, for seeing and being seen. She had none of that. She is alone, but Jesus sees her value and dignifies her potential. Just look at the change that transpires when her

heart opens to the value Jesus sees in her. At first, she addresses the stranger suspiciously as “Sir”, then “prophet”, then “Messiah”, then “Savior of the world.” And soon, this disenfranchised outsider is introducing the very people who excluded her to the One who has claimed her for who she is, a beloved child of God. Her witness may be pensive or hesitant, but it is real, it is personal, and thus, it is powerful.

Jesus is showing us how to be the church. It’s not about denigrating what we conclude is wrong with someone, it is about nurturing what is valuable in every person. As with the farmer, it is challenging work that takes patience and time and persistence; for a harvest of trust and relationship does not just happen, it is nurtured, tended, watered, and prayed over. And then you get up the next day and do it again. Compassion, humility, mercy, and grace; Patience, forbearance, kindness, and generosity.

Somehow, throughout history we have regularly forgotten that, as is so poignantly expressed in a favorite classic hymn about Christ’s church: “By schisms rent asunder; by heresies distressed.” Religion has always been undermined by hate, prejudice, pride, and the lust for power. My parents had a record album recorded in the turbulent 1960’s

by a brilliant Jewish humorist/political satirist/songwriter named Tom Lehrer, and in spoofing the ironic manufactured holiday called National Brotherhood Week, he challenged his audience, saying that during National Brotherhood Week you should: “Stand up and shake the hand of someone you can't stand; you can tolerate him if you try ... All of my folks hate all of your folks. It's american as apple pie.”

The third verse hits a little too close to home:

“Oh the protestants hate the catholics
and the catholics hate the protestants
and the hindus hate the muslims
and everybody hates the jews...”

That was written in 1965, but it sounds suspiciously like the normative observation made about religion today. But that’s not what our endeavor here should bring to mind; that’s not what or who Christ has called us to be. In fact, we are supposed to be the antidote to that. Jesus hasn’t only told us what to do; Jesus has shown us what to do. Right here. Jesus did not avoid, ignore, or condemn the Samaritan woman. Jesus engaged her; talked not at her but with her. Jesus listened to her. Jesus heard her, understood her. That is to be what we are all about – engage our neighbor and the stranger, too. Listen to

them, not to correct, but to understand. The command to love your neighbor does not offer any excused absences. It's hard work, day in and day out. And in the miasma of our polarized circus of politics and culture, our work here is more important than ever.

Like all institutions, mainline Presbyterianism has had its share of blind spots, but this is one thing we got right. The Confession of 1967 states: God has created the peoples of the earth to be one universal family. In his reconciling love, God overcomes the barriers between sisters and brothers and breaks down every form of discrimination based on racial or ethnic difference, real or imaginary. The church is called to bring all people to receive and uphold one another as persons in all relationships of life ... Congregations, individuals, or groups of Christians who exclude, dominate, or patronize others, however subtly, resist the Spirit of God and bring contempt on the faith which they profess.”

Jesus hasn't just told us what to do. Jesus has shown us what to do right here, and the time is now. You can be disheartened, even disgusted by the headlines and the hatred ... or ... together we can be

the people, the church God has called us to be. Love doesn't take a day off. And the harvest can't wait. Amen.