

## **Increasing Your Yield - Sermon – October 11, 2020**

Driving home from Christopher Lake earlier this week Beth and I noticed how most of the crops were already harvested, and those few fields not finished all seemed to have combines working in them. It was good to see that the farmers were able to get their crops off this year, and from what I've heard the crops have been decent if not quite good in most places. Because so many things can go wrong in a growing season – drought, hail, pestilence – when a good crop is harvested there is a deep sense of gratitude or, in some cases, even relief.

I think this is part of the reason why all around the world, throughout recorded history, there have always been harvest festivals. Two of the three primary religious festivals of the Hebrew people were essentially harvest festivals – with the emphasis on giving God thanks for the blessings of the land. This weekend Canadians also reflect on the completed harvest with the celebration of Thanksgiving, and while our direct connection to farming the land may be generations removed there is still an understanding of the harvest being something that benefits all Canadians.

The thing about farming, or gardening, is that there is only so much that is in your control – most of the process is outside of one's control. One can choose what seeds to plant, where and when to plant, one can remove weeds from around the plants, one can water the plants... but mostly we all wait as the seeds sprout and grow. The miracle of plant growth is beyond our ability to create, this is God's realm and thus at harvest time we turn to God with gratitude for the blessings of the land.

If we forget that God is the source of our blessings then instead of gratitude we will develop a sense of misplaced pride. In our reading from Deuteronomy the LORD, speaking through Moses, warns the Hebrews "Don't think to yourself, My own strength and abilities have produced all this prosperity for me." This warning is followed by a simple admonition "Remember the LORD your God!" Thanksgiving should be a time to remember what God has done for us, all that God has provided for us, and to recommit ourselves to the covenant relationship with God that sustains us through the generations.

When we forget that God is the source of the blessings we enjoy then we begin to see ourselves as the source of our well-being. The passage in Deuteronomy warns that this forgetting of God leads to arrogant attitudes, and those self-centered attitudes cause behavior contrary to God's will.

This ancient wisdom has been validated by the work of modern researchers. Summarizing a number of recent studies Paul Piff, a social psychologist, explains what often happens when people become more wealthy, he writes “As a person’s level of wealth increases, their feelings of compassion and empathy go down, and their feelings of entitlement, of deservingness, and their ideology of self-interest increases.” These of course are generalizations, and there are people for whom an increase in wealth has not led them to forget God. The key is not how much wealth is generated, rather whether the person believes they are the sole source of their good fortune. When we forget that God is the source of all blessings, we all too easily stray off the path of righteousness and our harvest will be poor – in spite of how much wealth we enjoy.

That sounds like a contradiction, to be consumed by wealth yet have a poor harvest. Yet it depends on what kind of harvest we are talking about. The Apostle Paul in his letter to the Corinthians talks about a different kind of harvest, a different kind of crop. Paul is concerned that the Christians in Corinth increase the crop of righteousness – that they should display a bounty of right-living. Specifically, Paul talks about service to others as the fruits of this harvest of righteousness. When Paul says “*You will be made rich in every way*” he is not talking about monetary wealth, but rather rich in the fruits of the Spirit. When we are rich in the fruits of the Spirit then we can “*be generous in every way.*”

Such generosity could be sharing one’s wealth with others in need, or it could be sharing one’s time with others who are lonely or need encouragement. It could be sharing one’s skills – mending a torn garment or fixing an electrical appliance – and in doing so making someone else’s life better. It could be sharing one’s insights or knowledge in such a way that others gain new understanding which leads to better choices. In all these things when we share what God has gifted us with for the benefit of others we are increasing the yield of God’s harvest.

Paul tells the Corinthians that such sharing of the blessings of God “*produces thanksgiving to God.*” This in turn will lead others to “*give honor to God for your obedience to your confession of Christ’s gospel. They will do this because this service provides evidence of your obedience, and because of your generosity in sharing with them and with everyone.*” Thanksgiving leads to further gratitude, and ultimately all honor and glory goes to God.

Let me tell you a story that illustrates how serving others can result in thanksgiving to God. This happened back in the summer, I wanted to take pictures of the comet Neowise so I drove north of the city out to the little country church near Craven that I have taken pictures at many times before. There were clouds that were obstructing the view of the comet at first, but I kept waiting, hoping that they would clear off enough to reveal the comet. Eventually my patience was rewarded and I was able to get some pictures of the church in the foreground with the comet in the heavens above it.

The clouds moved back in and I decided it was time to head home. By now it was after midnight. When I left the church I thought I smelled something like burning rubber, but it dissipated and I didn't think any further about it. I had just turned south on to highway 6 when all of a sudden my back left tire blew. Fortunately, I wasn't going fast at that point and I was able to pull on to the shoulder and stop the car without incident. When I got out and looked at the damage it was obvious, I was going to need to put on the spare tire. I happened to have a good flashlight with me so I could see enough to loosen off the lug nuts. I got the vehicle jacked up enough to get the blown tire off, but when I went to put the spare on it wouldn't go on. The vehicle had to be lifted higher.

So I lowered the car and moved the jack to a different location and worked at raising the car again. I got the jack as high as it would go, but I still couldn't get the tire on. Once again I lowered the car and tried to figure out a better location for the jack. By this point I had spent almost an hour working at this problem and was getting frustrated, tired and worried. If I couldn't get the spare tire on what was I going to do? Call one of my family members, hoping they will wake up to answer their phone and have them come and get me – leaving my vehicle on the side of the road?

It was about this time when the headlights of a vehicle didn't zoom by me, but instead slowed down and pulled up right behind me. I felt my anxiety level go up a few notches... was I about to be robbed, taking advantage of my vulnerable situation and a lack of witnesses? Then suddenly some red and blue flashing lights turned on, and I realized it was the police. Relieved I walked back towards the RCMP cruiser, and a voice called out in the dark "What's the problem here?"

So I explained my problem with the jack not lifting the car high enough to get the spare tire on. Next thing I knew the RCMP officer was down on his hands and knees trying to figure out the solution. He took over working the jack and soon determined that it simply wasn't going to work – it wasn't tall enough.

So then the officer dug around in his vehicle to get a different jack. With a new jack in place he was able to raise the car far enough off the ground that we could get the spare tire on. He tightened up the lug nuts, lowered my vehicle down again. Everything looked good (other than the blown tire which was completely shot). The officer gathered up his tools, and bid me good night. As he was heading back to his cruiser I asked his name so I could thank him more personally. Constable Jack, was the reply. So I thanked officer Jack, and drove off to Regina.

All the way home I thanked God that there was someone who was willing to stop and help me. To me it truly felt like God was taking care of me in my time of need. When I recounted this story on Facebook I found out that there were people who knew this officer, that his name really was Jack, and that he worships at the Lutheran church in Strasbourg. Perhaps Constable Jack didn't think he did much that night, maybe he just considered helping me as part of his job, but to me I felt his service was both timely, and beyond the call of duty. His willingness to share his time and skill resulted in a bountiful harvest of thanksgiving. It maybe didn't seem like much to him, but to me it meant a lot. When we share what God has gifted us with for the benefit of others we are increasing the yield of God's harvest.

When the ancient Hebrews participated in the pilgrimage festivals, it was not only so they could express their thanks for the many blessings that God had bestowed on them, including the harvest of the land – another feature of these festivals was an opportunity to be reminded of their covenant relationship with God, and to hear again what God requires of his people. The thanksgiving was coupled with an openness to hear and do God's will. It was a time to remember and renew their efforts to live as God's people.

May our Thanksgiving celebration be the same for us – may it be a time not just to count our blessings, but to remember and renew our commitment to live as Christ's disciples in this world. To reclaim our identity as people who share what we have with others, to revive our efforts to work for the common good. May we be people who seek to increase our yield in the harvest that matters – a crop which is righteousness. May we be generous in our sharing that we may reap a generous crop. May we be people who recognize the countless blessings of God, especially the gift of Jesus Christ who graces us with abundant life. May we be people of gratitude who turn to God with words of thanksgiving and praise, and lives of love and service.

As Paul writes "Thank God for his gift that words can't describe!" Amen.