

Sowing in Tears...Reaping in Joy

Psalm 126; Philippians 4:10-13

[A sermon preached by the Rev. Stan Gockel at the First Presbyterian Church of Portland, Indiana on November 20, 2016]

"May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy." (Psalm 126:5)

I

The Bible is the product of a people who knew first hand the cycles of the land.

They were a people intimately familiar with the seasons of nature—
 winter, spring, summer and fall,
 seedtime and harvest.

Because they were in tune with the earth, they knew that—
 if the rains did not come,
 if the earth did not provide,
 then they would suffer,
 their children would grow malnourished,
 and eventually there would be no hope of survival.

We in our day are, for the most part, far removed from such an experience of dependence on the land.

Few of us are involved in farming...
 we have year-round access to fruits and vegetables in our local supermarkets,
 and we are assured of always having more than enough to eat.

When the psalmist talks about sowing in tears and reaping in joy,
 we have to confess that we really do not know what this means.

II

A story out of Africa helps us understand what the psalmist means when he talks about sowing in tears and reaping in joy.

The place is the Sahel, a stretch of land just beneath the Sahara Desert.

The climate of the Sahel is much like that of Palestine...

there is a concentration of rain in the months of May, June, July, and August,

then not a drop of rain falls for eight months.

It is in the space of those four months—

May through August—

when you grow your food.

If you are among the fortunate, you would have a plot of land an acre or two in size.

You would grow your own food there, and the only tool you have, besides the strength of your back, is a short handled hoe.

You would have neither a tractor nor a plow, and in a good year your income might reach as high as three hundred dollars.

October and November are beautiful months.

The harvest has come and the storage shed is full of grain.

People sing and dance, and in their churches they give thanks to God for what they have.

Because of their abundance they are able to eat two meals a day—

a meal in the morning and another in the evening

just after the sun has gone down.

They grind maize (corn) between two stones to make corn meal,

and then they boil the corn meal in water to make a mush—called nshima—
that has the consistency of day-old cream of wheat.

They form that into balls with their hands,

dip it into a sauce,

and pop it into their mouths.

December comes and the bags of grain begin to diminish.

Many families begin to omit the morning meal,
and by the end of January not a family in the village is eating more than a single meal a day.

Then in February that single evening meal begins to diminish,
for the end of the grain is in sight.

People begin to feel the clutch of hunger once again.

Old people grow weak; children begin to succumb to sickness.

It is hard to stay well on half-a-meal a day.

April is the month that haunts the memory.

The food is almost gone now,
and the parents go to the bush country where they scrape the bark from the trees and dig up roots which they grind together to make into a thin gruel.

Those who can will pawn a chair or a cooking pot to buy a bit of grain from those who are rich and have grain to spare.

III

Then the inevitable happens.

A six or seven year old boy comes running into the house to his father with a smile on his face and excitement in his heart.

"*Daddy! Daddy!*" he shouts, "*we have grain.*"

"*Son,*" says the father, "*you know we haven't had grain for weeks.*"

"*Yes, we have!*" the boy insists. "*Out in the hut where we keep the goats...there's a leather sack hanging up on the wall. I reached up and put my hand down in there...and Daddy...there's grain! We can make some flour, and tonight our tummies will be full.*"

And with tears in his eyes the father shakes his head.

"Son, we can't do that!...that's the seed for planting. That's all that stands between us and starvation. We're waiting for the rains, and when they come we must plant the seed."

Finally in May the rains arrive,
and then that boy watches his father take the sack from the wall...
to do the unreasonable and the unimaginable.

Instead of feeding his desperately weakened family,
he goes to the field and,
with tears streaming down his face,
he takes the precious seed and throws it away...
scattering it in the soil.

Why? Because he believes in the faithfulness of the God of the harvest.

Yet the act of sowing hurts so much that it is accompanied by tears.

Still their pastors remind them that this is the law of the harvest as explained in the Psalms:

Don't expect to rejoice later unless you are willing to sow in tears now. For...

"Those who go out weeping bearing the seed for sowing shall come home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves."

IV

The truth of this story is that Thanksgiving is a matter of perspective.

While life is not always easy,
while sorrows and tragedies will come,
still the harvest of God's grace is faithful.

Always we are called to give thanks to the God of the harvest.

This was certainly true of the Pilgrims.

As we all know, the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth Rock on December 20, 1620, 396 years ago.

One hundred and two of them had survived that 66-day voyage across the Atlantic on the Mayflower.

A man had died during the passage and a baby had been born.

As they set foot on land that day, the cloaks they wore were not nearly enough to keep out the chill winds that blow off the ocean during that time of the year.

Nor were the shoes they wore adequate against the wet snow.

With hard work they built shelters, but one by one in the harshness of that first winter they placed their comrades in unmarked graves,
afraid that the natives would take note of their rapidly declining numbers.

There were times during that winter when their daily ration was reduced to only five kernels of corn.

When spring came there were only 52 of them left,
and every single one of the 52 refused the opportunity to return to England on the Mayflower when it set sail.

Really it was the Native Americans who insured their survival.

Samoset and Squanto taught them to fish the creeks for alewives.

They taught the Pilgrims how to plant corn and beans, squash and pumpkins,
how to place a fish in the ground in order to fertilize the seed.

The Pilgrims sowed the seed with the tears of their losses.

But then they reaped the harvest with rejoicing—
as they invited Massasoit and some 90 of his braves to share that first thanksgiving celebration,
almost one year after they arrived at Plymouth.

V

My friends, this holiday we call Thanksgiving is really a matter of perspective—of how we view life and its events.

Is the glass of life half empty or half full?

What you see depends in part on what you choose to see.

A man said to the farmer, "*What's the value of that cow out there?*"

The farmer thought for a moment and said,

*"That depends...are you the tax assessor,
do you want to buy her,
or did you hit her with your truck?"*

In the "Peanuts" comic strip, Snoopy was moved to deep contemplation as he watched Charlie Brown and Linus pass by. He thinks to himself:

*"I wonder why some of us are born dogs while others are born people?
Is it just pure chance or what is it? Somehow the whole thing doesn't
seem fair."*

Then as Snoopy dances away with incredible joy, he thinks:

"Why should I have been the lucky one?"

The Apostle Paul expressed this matter of perspective when he said:

"I have learned to be content with whatever I have. I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me." (Philippians 4:11-13)

What does it mean to be content in all things?

Doyle Masters was a pastor who was stricken with cancer.

He knew there was no hope, but, like Paul, he was content.

This is what he wrote to his congregation:

"These past few days have rolled over us like an avalanche, leaving in their wake some central certainties which make up my thanksgiving list. Out of the dark night of the soul has come the sunlight of God's love. I am thankful for a God who is real and personal, for a Christ who is present in power, and for the Holy Spirit who is by our side in every struggle....My thanksgiving list is made this year not from what I have but from who has me....a God who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all I ask or think."

"I have learned to be content with whatever I have."

The farmer in the Sahel...

the Pilgrims...

the Apostle Paul...

Doyle Masters...

all of them knew that life is a series of experiences,

some of them good,

some of them bad.

But always we look for those little signs of life,

those tiny seeds of hope,

the promise that even as we sow in tears,

we have the hope of reaping with shouts of joy.

VI

Thomas Merton wrote:

To be grateful is to recognize the Love of God in everything he has given us—and he has given us everything. Every breath we draw is a gift of his love, every moment of existence is a grace, for it brings with it immense graces from him. Gratitude therefore takes nothing for granted, is never unresponsive, is constantly awakening to new wonder and to praise for the goodness of God. For the grateful person knows that God is good, not by hearsay but by experience. And that is what makes all the difference.

No, my friends, we may not be able to give thanks for the tragic illness,

for the sudden accident,
for the terrible misfortune,
for the finality of death that has taken someone we love

But there are some things you can be thankful for.

You can be thankful for the strength you have found in the midst of trial.

You can be thankful for the comfort you have known in the midst of sorrow.

You can be thankful for the friendships that have deepened in the midst of pain and loss.

You can be thankful for the fellowship of Christ's church that has sustained you in your time of need.

You can be thankful for the fact that life does go on,
that much of it is good,
and that somewhere a baby is born every minute.

You can be thankful for a God who loves you,
who will never leave you or forsake you,
from whose love nothing can separate you.

And we can all be thankful that those who sow in tears shall reap with shouts of joy.

VII

Annie Johnson Flint experienced more sorrow and heartache in her life than most people can ever imagine.

She was born on Christmas Eve 1866 in a small New Jersey town.

When Annie was three her mother died, and soon after her father became so ill he could no longer take care of his children and was forced to give them up for adoption.

Annie and her sister were adopted by a wonderful loving Christian family, the Flints. But before she had finished high school, both of her adoptive parents had

died as well.

Imagine losing not just one, but two sets of parents as a child.

Annie's goal was to be a teacher, and she continued her education and was able to achieve her goal, teaching in the very same school she had attended.

But in her second year of teaching she became afflicted with arthritis so badly that she had to give up teaching after only three years.

She was soon unable to walk, and eventually could not even pick up a pencil and so she would dictate her poems to friends.

She spent the rest of her life, about forty years, bound to a wheelchair and living in a sanitarium where others could provide for her daily needs.

Despite her afflictions, Annie Johnson Flint produced some of the most inspiring religious poetry the world has ever seen.

Let me conclude with one of her finest:

*He giveth more grace when the burdens grow greater,
He sendeth more strength when the labors increase;
To added affliction He addeth His mercy;
To multiplied trials, His multiplied peace.*

*When we have exhausted our store of endurance,
When our strength has failed ere the day is half done,
When we reach the end of our hoarded resources,
Our Father's full giving is only begun.*

*His love has no limit; His grace has no measure.
His pow'r has no boundary known unto men;
For out of His infinite riches in Jesus,
He giveth, and giveth, and giveth again!*

Amen.