

‘Planting Seeds for a Harvest of Peace’

Harvest Sunday Sermon

22 September, 2013

Amos 8:1-12

Luke 19:37-44

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Prayer: Stir up our hunger, Lord, our hunger and thirst for your truth. And then feed us by your Spirit, as we open ourselves to receive your life-giving Word. Speak to us not only through the words that are uttered here this morning, but also in the ways and words that you alone know our hearts need to hear. Amen.

It’s possible to go about our lives as though we’re entitled to everything we’ve got, especially when we feel we’ve worked hard to acquire what we have; when we’ve been disciplined in order to achieve what we’ve managed to accomplish. Still, most people know that that’s not true. There are enough experiences of mysterious chance and random choice that most sensible people recognise that none of us comes anywhere close to being ‘self-made’.

In fact, one of the things that we tend to acknowledge on Sundays—and especially on Harvest Sundays—is that most of us take an awful lot for granted. That is to say, we rather self-consciously recognise that as a human race, and in very many cases as individuals, our actions suggest that we think we’re simply *granted* all that we have, in contrast to having been *entrusted* with it.

There’s a difference, isn’t there? The one seems to imply that we’re not accountable for what we do with what we’re given—it’s simply been given, granted, and what we do with it is completely up to us. The other suggests that there’s an investment of trust and a confidence that we will take good care of what we’ve been given—and more than that, that there’s a legitimate expectation that we might account for our choices and actions.

The truth is, both play out in the human experience. We *do* have enormous freedom, and there is a kind of accountability that goes on. The thing is, our freedom is not without consequences—and the impact and accountability doesn’t just get levelled on those who have been entrusted with the larger portions and choose either to squander or to hoard them.

Our annual Harvest Service is the Sunday each year when we intentionally mark out a time to reflect on the fruits of our efforts, to give thanks not only for the ability to labour and contribute to the ways that the earth produces food and drink and livelihood for us, but also to thank God for the undeserved abundance we enjoy. Most of us recognise that, although we may not have as much as our neighbour, our homes and our lifestyles participate in the top 5-10% (if not the top 1%) of all the households in the world.

Last week’s lectionary texts and sermon helped us to focus on the fact that we live in a world, we inhabit a reality that’s infected, shot through, with sin: we are broken, and we all

participate in conscious and unconscious ways that keep the wedge, separating *us* from *God's dream for us*, firmly in place. Left to our own devices, we would be without hope or salvation. But, hallelujah, God's vision is greater than our own—and God's ability to act (to say nothing of God's patience and perseverance) is also far greater than our own . . . and so neither we, nor this world, are ultimately a lost cause!

Quite often, the Bible lessons selected for Harvest Sunday are praise-orientated, giving thanks for the abundance of creation, acknowledging the gifts of God and our enjoyment of them, and asking for divine blessing and favour to continue to be lavished upon us, so that we might work with God to bless the rest of the world.

This morning's scripture texts. . . well, they weren't exactly traditional Harvest/praise-type texts were they? How would you characterise them? [Judgmental—texts of judgement; lamentations; frustrated.]

I think that the passages read for us today are, above all, challenging. Both the reading from Amos and the Gospel text from Luke expressed messages of judgment and frustration with the ways that the people of God had largely ignored everything that God was doing in the world—and trying so hard to do through them.

Amos, having witnessed a vision perhaps somewhat similar to the one spread before us this morning—he'd seen an overflowing basket of summer produce—might understandably have expected (or at least hoped for) a happy message to accompany the gift basket. "Enjoy your stay in the land; this is all for you and you alone." Or some message like that.

But that's not what he got, is it? Amos got an earful about how the people of Israel were more concerned with what kind of profit they could get from a bumper-crop year than they were with the plight of the poor; more eager to gorge themselves at celebratory feasts, than they were to feed those who hadn't eaten for days; more inclined to take advantage of the desperation of the down-and-out than they were to investigate and redress whatever it was that drove them to their indigence and desperation in the first place. God was not happy, and the final verses of our first scripture text this morning described the spiritual starvation that would plague the people, and indeed, it did.

The portrait of Jerusalem we heard painted for us in Luke's gospel was similarly bleak. It starts out as a scene of rejoicing and celebration—the disciples are all heading into Jerusalem with Jesus, praising God for all of the amazing acts of authority and healing that they've witnessed their Teacher doing. They see God's power at work, and they can't keep quiet about it. In fact, they're so noisy and excited that some of the scholarly religious authorities—the Pharisees—get annoyed and ask Jesus to keep his guys quiet, get them under control.

We're heading back into University term time, and a bunch of second-year students will be returning to College a bit stressed and wanting some peace and quiet because they'll have to sit exams in the next week or two. I've been thinking about them with some sympathy. And maybe that's why it occurred to me that perhaps the complainers might have had a big exam coming up. In any event, Jesus responds that if his disciples were silent, the very stones around them would cry

out. God's work in the world deserves joyful recognition and proclamation—and if *we* won't talk about it, then the stones and mountains and wheat fields and allotments all around us *will!*

But what follows suggests that the city of Jerusalem hasn't been paying attention to God's work, either around them or within. The spotlight sentence for today is from Jesus' lament over the city: "If only you, even you. . ." (you, Jerusalem, the so-called Holy City of God, the dwelling place of the Temple, the pride and joy of patriarchs and matriarchs of the faith including great King David; the city to which people made lengthy pilgrimage, expressly for the purpose of paying attention to what God might be saying or doing among them) "If only you . . . had recognised on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes." Jesus goes on to bewail the ways in which the peoples' apathy and preoccupation with things *not of God* will ultimately destroy them, inside and out.

It's a common theme and it weaves its way all the way through the entirety of scripture: the Creator of this world, Almighty, eternal God, wants us to be tending to the least and the lost, the vulnerable, the downtrodden, the marginalised, the outcast, and the desperate. Because they, and those aspects of creation, are no less precious to the Giver and Lover of ALL life than are the comfortable, the movers and shakers, the powerful and well-endowed. Across the span of history, as it's reflected in our holy scriptures, human beings have recognised that God's way of doing things includes attending to every last bit and individual; *all* of life is sacred, and our careful regard for all of it is a matter of justice. It's what makes for peace.

Yesterday, the 21st of September, was the United Nations International Day of Peace. Churches around the world today are celebrating Peacemaking Sunday—offering prayers for world peace, and engaging in activities that promote it in their homes and communities. That's why our theme for this worship service combines both our annual Harvest theme and the more universal theme of peace making, by inviting us to think and pray about what might make for the things of peace. As we said in the introduction to the theme, today we're endeavouring to think about "planting seeds for a harvest of peace."

We live in a world that's increasingly gripped by a growing fear of outsiders; we are stunted by our mounting suspicion of those unlike ourselves, and as a result, we undermine our ability to recognise and claim the things that make for peace. Not just peace between nations, but peace within each individual. It's not an easy task. . . much easier, in many ways, is planting a crop of beans, or pumpkins, or spinach, or apples.

But it's what we're called to as disciples of Jesus Christ. We've been entrusted with some of the seeds that, when planted and nurtured, can lead to a harvest of peace. And many of those seeds get planted when we take actions that further the cause of justice in the world. If you want peace, the saying goes, work for justice. Because there can be no genuine or lasting peace without justice.

You and I may not be able to help out every impoverished person in every struggling nation. But one concrete, simple thing that each of us *can* do in order to make a difference is to support Fair Trade; we can purchase fairly traded goods whenever possible. Ann and Laurence have shared a

little bit about that already, and will share more at our Traid Craft 'Big Supper' harvest luncheon in a short while.

There are lots of other ways we can take action and plant seeds for peace as well—ways that regularly get encouraged here at Wheatley URC. We're going to have a chance to think about more of those ways over lunch. But for now, I invite you to enjoy a slide show that offers up images to help us continue our reflection on the subject. And I leave you with the hopeful words of another prophet—the prophet Micah—who painted a picture of what the world will look like when God's desires of peace and justice are being pursued:

Micah 4:1-4, NRSV

In days to come the mountain of the LORD's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised up above the hills. Peoples shall stream to it, and many nations shall come and say:

'Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths.'

For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. He shall judge between many peoples, and shall arbitrate between strong nations far away; they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning-hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more; but they shall all sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees, and no one shall make them afraid; for the mouth of the LORD of hosts has spoken.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

Slide show presented to the song, "Clean White Paper" by Christopher Grundy ©1999, *Here in Providence*. (<http://www.cdbaby.com/cd/christophergrundy2>)