

Sunday September 4, 2022
First Lesson: Philemon 1: 1-21
Gospel Lesson: Luke 14: 25-33
Sermon Series: Harvest Effect Week 1
Preacher: Kirstie J. Engel

We are beginning a new sermon series called “The Harvest Effect.” The sermonic purpose, focus and desired outcome for this sermon series is now that we have spent 35 weeks since January 2, 2022, on what it means to be effective in Leadership, Volunteerism, Spiritual Growth, Spiritual pruning and Spiritual Development of the Fruits of the Spirit by way of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control; now it is time to look at the harvest before us and see how we can tend to it, nurture it, cultivate it and preserve it, so that it may thrive and flourish.

- And so before diving into this message, I think it might be worthwhile for me to spend a few moments on what I mean by the harvest.
- So the plant harvest is what I am inviting us to look at as our main metaphor for this sermon series;
- And so starting off with the definition of harvesting according to the Google experts, it is **the process of gathering a ripe crop from the fields.**
- This gathering also known as reaping, is the cutting of grain or pulse for harvest, typically using a scythe, sickle, or reaper. On smaller farms with minimal mechanization, harvesting is the most labor-intensive activity of the growing season.
- So how one harvest's plants is **by picking the outer leaves and harvest the newer leaves as they reach the desired size.**
- Whole plants may be harvested by cutting just above the crown (growing point), removing the

petioles (leaf stems) if they are too large and fibrous.

- So why is it important to harvest crops?
- Well, because it is important to know when to harvest, since the correct time of harvest is crucial in **preventing crop losses**.
- Losses that can be caused by field animals, plant diseases, insect pests or certain weather conditions.
- Therefore, timely harvesting ensures good crop quality and market value.
- So then what is a spiritual harvest?
- **Each time we experience the closeness of God in a way that fills us spiritually**, we experience harvest.
- **Any time** we are filled by the Holy Spirit, we experience harvest.

- Therefore harvest then isn't something that we experience once a year, but something that we experience on a daily basis.
- But just like an actual harvest, I need to name that **the harvest doesn't just occur on its own.**
- For if we remember the parable of the Barren Fig Tree that keeps showing up in our conversations together; **it takes a grounds person** to dig around it and put manure on it," (Luke 13: 8)
- I stopped by to suggest that you and I...we are no different, **for a spiritual harvest does not happen on its own either;**
- **For 35 weeks** First UMC of Lincoln, we spent some serious time allowing the Holy Spirit to work through our own metaphorical soil;
- **For 35 weeks**, we have dived into some intense self reflection, spiritual development and growth challenges, to get to the place where we are right now;

- **It was a 35** week process that I submit was not only needed, but very much so necessary;
- For I would also suggest that many of us myself included, would not be able to even see the harvest, let alone work in it, without this spiritual propagation process;
- For like Matthew 9: 37 informs us “**The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few.**”
- I would add my Kirstie-ism to this scripture to say, “And there is a good reason why the workers are few.”
- **Because the harvest** that we are being invited to work in, is not that of a field of lilacs, or daffodils or apple orchards or corn for that matter;
- Even though I do know for a fact that even something like I just named is not an easy task to work in either;

- For my girls who worked at detasseling as an example for a couple of summers, were hot and tired and were worked beyond their physical limits;
- However the harvest that we are invited to work in, is even much more laborious than even this;
- For it **is a harvest** that will stretch us both physically and emotionally;
- **It is a harvest** that will test us both spiritually and intellectually;
- **It is a harvest** that will stretch us beyond our human capacity, for the work hours are limitless;
- The pay is nominal;
- The requirement and skill level is entirely dependable, upon something that is greater than you and I can physically see,
- It is a reliance that you and I will grow to intuitively know and trust is there, to help us, to equip us, to develop us, to teach us, what to do when the harvest has arrived.

- **And so this is the frame of mind that our leader of the Philemon passage is coming from in our first Lesson this morning in my biblical imagination;**
- For this is the only letter of Paul that begins by referring to himself as a **prisoner of Christ Jesus**.
- Much more often he refers to himself as an apostle of Christ Jesus (e.g., Gal. 1:1; Eph. 1:1; etc.).
- The Greek word translated **prisoner** is literally “a chain” (just as the word **bonds** in verse 13 would be literally translated “chains”).
- **At least five times** in this short letter Paul refers to his chains.
- And so what is Paul being chained to?
- To place this passage in context with our sermon series to discover the answer to this question, I feel lead to name that there is a person who is not being fully seen in this spiritual harvest.

- There is a person who is not being fully valued in this harvest.
- And his name is Onesimus.
- Onesimus was a slave, who our story informs us in verse 11 was once useless to this community;
- You see this small but significant detail, although mentioned briefly in our passage this morning in verse 11, did not go unnoticed by Paul, or myself nor our class participants of aspiring biblical scholars that meets on Wednesday nights in the *Applying the Sermon to Life*, for that matter.
- For theologically speaking, this is by far one of the most important details of this story;
- That in this congregation, community, family or church, you get to decide what it actually is for yourself; either way **there was a person** who felt so unseen,
- **There was a person** that felt so undervalued,
- **There was a person** that felt so marginalized,

- That he chose to run away;
- And Paul was struck by this so much,
- This slave Onesimus became enmeshed in his spiritual heart and psyche **so much**, that Paul had to say something on his behalf.
- For I think it is also important to also take note that Paul is not in prison technically——at least this time, but I stopped by to suggest that if one is passionate about matters of justice, peace and love for all, it can feel as if you are in chains, when you witness this level of injustice.
- For I don't know about you, but every time I learn of or witness some sort of injustice or mistreatment done towards children, animals, and any thing else that a person cannot physically change...because hello we were created to be in this image... something inside of my heart just breaks...every single time;

- And this is because when you and I truly get to the spiritual place of actually being in the harvest;
- We begin to see more like Christ sees;
- **We begin to really see** the broken,
- **We begin to really see** the marginalized;
- **We begin to really see** the hungry and the naked and those in bondage and imprisoned;
- We begin to see as Christ sees and like a car accident that we happen to be driving pass, I stopped by to say that once we see it...**we can't unsee it.**
- **We become like a prisoner to this level of injustice, which in this case is a good thing in my eyes;**
- Because the goal is that once we get to this place of really seeing, **we then begin the process of becoming.**

- **We begin the process** of becoming like Paul, the prisoner who intercedes for Onesimus the slave, one bondsman pleading for another bondsman.
- Which is the only way that we really can become thy kingdom come, as Earth as is in heaven;
- Is when we can really begin to walk in the shoes of our neighbor— this is how we fully become into loving our neighbor.
- **Getting back to the story, in begging mercy for Onesimus the slave, Paul reminds Philemon of his own imprisonment.**
- And why Paul was talking to Philemon and his community was because Philemon was a first-century Christian and a slave owner who also hosted a church in his home, most likely in Colossae.

- And so we begin to see Paul's skillful strategy in preserving this harvest that has somehow excluded one, really manifest.
- For Paul associates himself with **Timothy our brother**, chiefly because the youthful Timothy was an able evangelist (2 Tim. 4:5), and because he was a native of a neighboring city in Asia Minor, Lystra (Acts 16:1–2), the thought process was that perhaps Philemon may have come to regard Timothy with much Christian love and respect.
- So Paul writes to **Philemon the beloved and fellow-worker**, words that indicate Christian affection and close association in the work of the Lord.
- He refers to **Apphia our sister, which** may have been the wife of Philemon and perhaps is addressed as **our sister** both because she was a believer and because she was a worker along with

her husband among the believers that met in their home.

- Paul named **Archippus our fellow-soldier which** may have been the son of Philemon and Apphia, and may also have served as the pastor of the congregation that met in the house of Philemon.
- Lastly, **the church in the house** may have included only the household of Philemon, including parents, children, and slaves.
- More likely, it embraced a congregation of believers that met in the home of Philemon.
- The word “church,” though most commonly used in the New Testament to refer to all those who believed in Jesus, sometimes refers to a neighborhood group of believers meeting in one place for worship.
- And so it is with this group, family, church or council...again you get to choose what it is to you, Paul makes his appeal;

- **It is an appeal** that is not a demand, but an appeal based off what Paul knew to be true with this group;
- That **at their core**, they were loving;
- **At their core** they desired to be righteous,
- **It was an appeal** to a group of folks similar to us today, to consider **taking a second look** at this spiritual harvest and discern what is missing;
- **It was an appeal** to take a second look at this harvest, and reconsider what we may have mistakenly cast aside on the threshing floor;
- It was an appeal that was somewhat a risk for Paul to do,
- For me verses 12-13 informs us of this, when Paul who thought so much of Onesimus that he said *I am sending him, that is, my own heart, back to you. I wanted to keep him with me, so that he might be of service to me in your place during my imprisonment for the gospel;*

- However, Paul as a leader of the gospel understood the greater mission at hand, that it was not just for him to see value in Onesimus, it is for everyone to see value in Onesimus and treat him accordingly.
- **Bringing our gospel into more direct conversation this morning, this too is the goal of Jesus who is preaching to the large crowds that were following him.**
- It was a message that would describe what it would really take, for you and I to be able to tend to this harvest and Jesus expresses this with 4 examples.
- **The first example** created a lot of discussion from our Wednesday class on verse 26 of this passage that says *Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yeas , and even life itself, cannot be my disciple.*

- **For the class wrestled with the meaning of hate in this context.**
- A helpful way to look at this verse is to revisit the Parable of the Great Supper, where Christ indicated that if anyone loves anyone or anything more than he loves Him, he cannot be His disciple (v. 26).
- Therefore it is obvious that hate here means “loves less.”
- For Jesus, who is Love Incarnate, is not the author of hate.
- Therefore what Jesus is talking about is a conflict of loyalties. Our first commitment must always be to Christ, never to anyone else. For we cannot permit anyone, no matter how near and dear, to come between us and Christ.
- However, another heavy discussion that came up in our class time together that informs this verse of scripture in our gospel, took us back to the cuttings

that I preached on a few weeks ago from the parent plant, where I highlighted that the benefits of taking cuttings from the parent plant is that it allows a person to produce a new plant without all of the defects from the original plant.

- So from there, I shared a personal story of when I was growing up and started to date, where one time I brought home a Caucasian boy and presented him to my father and mother as my new boyfriend.
- It was my senior year at Winfield High School in Kansas, and let's just say I was taken aback by my dad's response to this news.
- My dad cried, because he thought that somehow he failed me as a father.
- To bring home a white boy, triggered him as a Black man who grew up during the Civil Rights Era.
- Not to mention he was afraid for me and the way the world would treat me being in an interracial

relationship.... So again I will reiterate...he cried, which was unusual for my dad to do.

- The only other time I witnessed my dad cry was four days before his passing, once he accepted that his transition from this Earth was inevitable.
- From then on, I dated within my race, simply because I never wanted to see that look of disappointment on my father's face again.
- Until one day I met my husband almost 7 years ago, and it became clear to me that although I very much valued both my mother and father's experience and upbringing, in my heart I felt that it was not right for me to take their entire counsel.
- For although the fear and tears from my dad, came forth in my mind when Steve and I began our courtship; not to mention there was some dissension of us being together on Steve's side of the family too, the Holy Spirit invited both Steve

and I to step out on faith in our love together and I am so glad that we did.

- For next month will be our 6 year marriage anniversary, and life has been greater because of our union together.
- For not only has our children been blessed by this union with all of the diversity and more that we have experienced together, the kin-dom has been enhanced by this union.
- For together, Steve and I have bloomed into becoming committed ministry partners, that aspires to tend to, nourish and equip others to work in this harvest too.
- All which took a measure of faith, trust and honesty, to be able to discern that some of the values that we have learned from our familial upbringings, may not have always been right or right for us, nor right for the kin-dom.

- Therefore I submit that it is important for you and I to keep looking at our embedded theologies and genealogies, so that we can continue to be the best metaphorical cuttings that we can be.
- **The second example** that the gospel reveals what it takes to work in the harvest, that caused some distress with our classmates was this idea of bearing the cross of Jesus.
- For to be a disciple of Christ means that one must **bear his own cross** (cf. Matthew 10:38).
- This means complete and continuous submission to the will of God. The Cross means death to self, in order that one may be fully alive to Christ.
- **The third example** Christ provides is that of a man who wants to build **a tower** (vv. 28–30). Unless he sits down first and counts the cost, and makes sure that he has enough money to finish, he may be left with a tower half-built that will be a laughing-stock for those who mock his failure.

- **The fourth example** is that of a king going to war against another king (vv. 31, 32). Unless he is assured of being able to defeat his enemy he had better not launch the attack. Instead he would be wise to sue for peace.
- And this is when I will put a pin in our conversation because this is the benefit of doing sermon series like these;
- For all of these examples including our first lesson, highlights that for you and I to really tend to this harvest, will take a spirit of sacrifice, if we wish to call ourselves laborers of this harvest.
- For the harvest is a lot to take in.
- **It is no wonder why** the harvest is plentiful and the workers may be few.
- **It is no wonder why** as a congregation it took us roughly 35 weeks of sermon series for us to get here together.

- Leading me to raise the most important question that some of us may be wondering at this point, **is the harvest worth it?**
- And this is where I will draw inspiration from the Celebration of Life that we just had for Rhonda Schoenmaker, who is the wife of our Chair of Trustees, David.
- For as I re-insert a section of her homily that I think is worth revisiting and retelling this morning; my mind goes back to the story of Jesus describing essentially this harvest I have been naming in Matthew 25: 37-40;
- For Jesus described the harvest as being filled with the broken, the hungry, the rejected and the unseen.
- There was a section of this pericope that always bothered me so much so, that I aspire not to fall into this category when folks asked Jesus; *When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or*

needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you? ‘

- You see, one of my life long fears that informs my personal theology, is not really being able to see what I am supposed to see.
- **I don't want to be** that disciple that misses the transfiguration moment.
- **I don't want to be** that disciple that misses the main reason why we are supposed to be here in the first place.
- **I want to be mainly** a Mary with a little Martha sprinkled in there every now and then.
- **I want to be a Peter** that may deny Jesus three times, but I won't make the same mistake a fourth time.
- **I want to be** the woman at the well that has enough good sense to give Jesus a drink of water if he asks for some.

- **I want to be** able to treat everyone with love and mutual respect, just in case they are an angel in disguise.
- **I want to learn** from Judas and not let the love of money or the fear of survival not to have me betray what I know to be true and good.
- I don't know if I am alone in any of these concerns, but these are the things that tend to keep me up at night.
- This is why I am so inspired by Rhonda's life and I celebrate her;
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- **For it is evident** that Rhonda lead her life in a way where she saw the harvest;
- **It is evident** that Rhonda understood the harvest;
- **The Spirited Laborer that Rhonda was**, rolled up her metaphorical sleeves in my theological imagination, time and time again to work tirelessly in this harvest without complaint.

- In Rhonda's life, she served several marginalized sections of our society that included the advocacy for LGBTQ+ communities and people impacted by HIV/Aids.
- Rhonda did so consistently and without hesitation and the results showed.
- For her life impact resonated with people from 11 am to almost 2pm yesterday; with an afterparty to continue on.
- There were countless stories of people revealing how Rhonda made sure to see and nurture all people while she was working in the harvest.
- Thereby informing us, that when we fully commit to the harvest in this way, the effect is immeasurable; the effect is endless.
- Letting us know, that not only is the harvest worth it, it is an crucial part to our lifelong journey.
- Let the people of the Harvest say Amen!