

### LOOKING FOR A HARVEST

--There is a certain probability that, a few minutes ago, even if you were listening only half to that reading from John's gospel, you heard one particular word popping up over and over again.

In case you missed it, here's a quick recap of Jesus' long speech:

- “[My Father] removes every branch in me that bears no fruit”
- “Every branch that bears fruit he prunes, to make it bear more fruit.”
- “. . . The branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine.”
- “Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit.”
- “My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit . . . .”
- “I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last . . . .”

What can I say? Eight mentions in sixteen verses. That seeming redundancy pretty well proves the fact that God loves fruit!

This, of course, does not represent any sort of personal endorsement on God's part for the Citrus Growers of America, or for any local apple orchard. It does, however, reflect the fact that, through the lens of John, God appears to have an obvious, abiding affection for the harvest.

That's good to remember on any “Harvest Home” occasion, as is the case today.

--The centrality of the harvest, the celebration around the harvest, is a very long-standing tradition in the Bible. It takes us all the way back to our Jewish roots, where some of the earliest texts in the Hebrew Scriptures, what we commonly call the Old Testament, refer to the “Feast of Ingathering.” It is essentially a harvest festival.

Jews know this as the holiday of *Sukkot*, which is the plural form of the word *sukkah*, meaning “booth” or “tabernacle,” a reference to the temporary structures that are erected in the fields, allowing farmers to live there on the premises as they continue with the harvest. Traditionally, then, *Sukkot* is also called the Feast of Tabernacles or Feast of Booths. Celebrated on the 15<sup>th</sup> day of the 7<sup>th</sup> month, which varies from late September to late October--about this time in our seasons--it marks the end of the agricultural year and acknowledges God's providential role in the plenty that is realized.

So, in the Book of Exodus we find Yahweh ordering Israel, “You shall observe the festival of harvest, of the first fruits [there's that word again!] of your labor, of what you sow in the field. You shall observe the festival of ingathering at the end of the year, when you gather in from the field the fruit [and once again!] of your labor” (Ex 23.16).

I know, on this little journey down memory lane of the Bible, you have probably started to drift off, as more compelling thoughts irresistibly turn to, for example, what you might order for lunch today at the Country Cupboard. How can the Book of Exodus compete with that?

So, let me bring your attention back, as we get to the “bottom line” for such a little side trip--the recognition that what we reiterate this morning in decorating our altar area with all sorts of harvest-related items dates back, not just 300 years to the beginnings of America, but more than 3,000 years to the beginnings of our faith.

Throughout all those generations, as a part of the broader rhythm of life, the phenomenon of the harvest has remained an important moment for celebration. To restate our earlier point: God genuinely relishes a proper harvest!

--“Well,” you may be saying to yourself, “what does any of this have to do with me? I’m not Bob Brouse, I’m no farmer. I’m not even a very good gardener. Heck, I manage to kill off my African violets!”

That may be, but it in no way suggests that agricultural language and imagery have no relevance more generally to human experience. Quite to the contrary, in fact. Having at hand the seeds of an opportunity, preparing and tilling the ground for fresh possibilities, or cultivating new attitudes and habits--they all refer not just to what occurs “out there” in the fields but also to what transpires “in here” in human souls.

In short, what happens agriculturally profoundly mirrors something of how things work spiritually--an outer/inner correspondence which is not lost on our early forebears, who quickly accord religious significance to their labors in the soil. Harvesting is one of these notions.

When farmers work their fields, they are looking for a harvest. For God, we are that field that is being worked. And God is also looking for a harvest, through us.

--It is true that God creates the ground. It doesn’t get lower or more basic than dirt. God creates the soil, but someone must work it in order for it to release its extraordinary potential to swell hard, brown seeds into green shoots and eventually leafy plants or golden grain.

As amazing as it is, the ground, however, cannot plow or cultivate itself; that requires human effort.

And it is true that, in creating the world as it is to function as it naturally does, God is instrumental in giving rise to those seeds, seeds which remarkably produce out of themselves all sorts of things that we eat and otherwise can make use of.

As extraordinary as they are, the seeds, however, cannot plant or tend themselves; if the new growth is to escape disease, survive insect, and prevail against weed, that, too, will require continuing human effort.

The harvest, in other words, is always a cooperative venture between Creator and creature, between God and humankind. And what is true in fields of wheat or corn or pumpkins is every bit as true in the field of human experience. God gives the basics, but if there is to be any sort of positive yield at the end, there must be human engagement. No wonder, then, that the bountiful

harvest brings joy to both parties of the successful partnership.

--Truly, it's a small step from the way things work in the world of agriculture to the way that things work in our own personal worlds and, for that matter, in the world of, say, the church. If there is to be a good harvest, over time there has got to be sustained significant human investment in the process--or, just as would occur as well in Bob Brouse's fields, there will be only brambles.

Therefore, we get the point that the evangelist John is straining so hard to make: God loves fruit--and we know he's not talking about pomegranates! God loves a good harvest--and we know that he's not talking about barley!

Not surprisingly, we hear Jesus saying that we have been created, and equipped, and called, and empowered to go and do the necessary work, labor that will enable the bearing of God's fruit, fruit surely that will last.

On this "Harvest Home" reminder, then, we can ask meaningfully of ourselves:

What sort of harvest are we hoping for?

What sort of harvest are we planning on here?

And, most important of all, what sort of harvest are we working towards?