

Sermon
Smyrna UCC
February 19, 2017
Seventh Sunday after Epiphany

“Reaping the Harvest of the Land”

Scriptures: (Lectionary)
Old Testament – Lev 19:9-18
New Testament – Matthew 5:38-48

Grace to you, and peace, from God our Creator, our Redeemer, and our Sustainer. Amen.

This morning, when I got up in the dark to have a cup of tea before getting ready for church, I was in for a lovely surprise. For there, in the kitchen, in a little pot, were three bright yellow daffodils that had bloomed overnight. Spring is almost here, my friends! Only 30 more days until the official start of spring. Get your gardening gloves ready!

And after the planting, comes the tending – the summer of weeding and watering. A time to work, and a time to rest. For the harvest will surely come.

And then comes the fall – a time to gather in before the winter rains and snows. We gather as much as we can before the frost arrives.

People have been doing this since time immemorial.

We are blessed by the God of all creation. Amen? Amen.

Some have it a little harder, though. There are people without access to any land, without any work, and there always have been. God calls us to care ABOUT the stranger. And even more dramatically, God calls us to care FOR the stranger.

How do I know that God wants us to do this? Well, the lectionary texts for today are pretty clear about that. Let’s revisit them for a moment.

“You shall not strip your crops bare, or gather all the fallen fruit. Save some to feed the poor and the alien among you,” says the Lord your God.

Most of us are lucky enough to be able to eat from that which we have grown or purchased from what we have earned – but not everyone is. Don’t forget the poor. Don’t forget the alien – the refugee, the undocumented immigrant to your land. That’s not my idea. That’s God’s. And God doesn’t ask whether the poor and alien are worthy, only if they are hungry. God treats the poor and aliens like God treats us.

God also commands the people, in this Leviticus text: Don’t steal. Don’t defraud people. Don’t tell lies. Each of these things is said twice in this particular text. They are important to the social fabric of the community.

God also says, twice: “Don’t mock the disabled. “You shall not revile the deaf. Don’t put an obstacle in front of a blind person to trip them. You shall fear your God: I am the Lord.”

Don’t be partial to the poor, the text says, and don’t defer to the rich. BE FAIR. Most people are good, but there are some, poor and rich, who make horrible choices. Treat each person as an individual, not a stereotype, and judge each person on their own merits.

Get along with your relatives, the text continues, and cut them some slack. Your neighbors, too. But, if someone is saying and doing crazy things, you need to speak up, or what happens will be your fault, too, because you did nothing.

And P.S. Love your neighbor as yourself.

Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount, goes on even further to say, be perfect, like God....

We've got a situation in our land, right now, in this almost-spring of 2017, it seems. The people who came to glean along the edges of our economy – to do the job of day laboring in the fields – are being blamed for that which is bothering us. And what our land is reaping for thinking this way is a harvest of mistrust, resentment, and fear. Others are being blamed, too. Those Muslims. Those lesbians, gays, bisexuals, transgendered people. Those women who don't know their place.

But I am certain that having undocumented farm workers among us is not what is bothering us at core. It's not Muslims, either. It's not people from the LGBTQ communities. It's not women wanting equal pay for equal work. It's not the poor.

I am certain that what is really bothering us, keeping us up at night, and troubling us when we rise in the morning is, ourselves. Our own worries about our lives, our children, our future. And we are looking in the wrong places for hope. Our hope is in LOVE, not in fear.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was the sixth child in his family. He born on February 4, 1906 into an upper-middle class German family of doctors and scientists in what is now Breslau, Poland. When it came time for him to go to university, he told his family that he was going to study religion. They were not very happy about it because they wanted him to do something more substantial with his life than that. But he persisted, studying at the universities of Tübingen and Berlin. After graduation, he served for a year as a student pastor in Spain, and then went to Union Seminary in New York for graduate school. When he came back, he became a lecturer in systematic theology at the University of Berlin.

But the collaboration between the State Church and the leadership of Nazi Germany bothered him terribly. With other pastors and professors, he founded the "Confessing Church."

He took a position as a pastor in London for two years, and then returned to Union Seminary, seeking a safe harbor from the war, which had arrived in London by then. But after only two weeks in New York, he told his sponsor, professor Reinhold Niebuhr, “I will have no right to participate in the reconstruction of Christian life in Germany after the war if I do not share the trials of this time with my people.”

Those of you who know Bonhoeffer’s story, know that he was arrested by the Gestapo and spent two years in prison. From there, he wrote these words of hope, which still ring true today: “The world is overcome not through destruction, but through reconciliation. Not ideals, not programs, nor conscience, nor duty, nor responsibility, nor virtue, but only God’s perfect love can encounter reality and overcome it. Nor is it some universal idea of love, but rather the love of God in Jesus Christ, a love genuinely lived, that does this.”

What God, and God through Jesus says is this: “Do not fear each other. There is enough food, and work, and shelter in the world, if you share. There is enough kindness in the world, if we believe in the power of love.

Being poor is not a crime. Being rich is not a crime. But live, and act, out of love. Care about other people, whether you are rich or poor. Act with dignity, and expect the same of others.

There are people who steal, defraud, and lie. Call them out on it and expect them to live in right relationship with others, whether it is your brother, your neighbor, or your President. Or yourself. For all of us have sinned. But we are all called to be perfect, Jesus said.

When we care for the poor and the alien among us, giving them a place to be, to sustain themselves and their families, when we are honest and responsible, and treat the disabled and

those who are different with kindness, then we shall reap the true harvest of the land that God has given us: Justice and Peace for all. Even for ourselves.

Thanks be to God. Amen? Amen.