

First Presbyterian Church
Galatians 6:1-10, “In the Family of God, We Reap What We Sow”
by Pastor Matt Johnson, 10/20/2024

It's pumpkin season, folks.

Pumpkin spiced lattes are now available.

You need to start thinking about how you want to carve
your pumpkins into jack-o-lanterns for Halloween.

Soon someone will offer you pumpkin bread,

but it will probably still be around a month before you get pumpkin pie.
(Show off little pumpkin.)

I'm not certain about this, but if you are decorating and don't include a pumpkin,
it's possible you will be fined by local authorities.

How many of you have grown a pumpkin?

For those of you who have grown a pumpkin,
how many planted a pumpkin seed,
but a sunflower came out?

How many have planted a pumpkin seed, but a cucumber came out?

You harvest the same vegetable that you plant.
Or, in the words of the Apostle Paul,
you reap what you sow.

This statement, on its own, is not profound. It's ... pretty obvious, right?

But somehow it becomes profound when the Apostle Paul
applies it to the fruit that is harvested in our life in v. 7:

“Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked.

**People reap what they sow. Those who sow to please their sinful nature,
from that nature will reap destruction;
those who sow to please the Spirit,
from the Spirit will reap eternal life.”**

God cannot be mocked ... what does that have to do with sowing and reaping?

Well, back to my pumpkin planting illustration,

let's say (just hypothetically) that I'm really bad at gardening.

And all I can do is get a bunch of pumpkin seeds and throw them
all over my garden area.

When they first germinate and start to sprout, it's a little tough to see what they are.

So when friends come over, I tell them, "Oh, yeah, I got everything here:

Tomatoes, cucumber, those little ones over there are radishes,
hot peppers and sweet peas, and uh, there's a few pumpkins."

If I expected my friends to believe me, I would be mocking their intelligence.

Inside I would be saying, "Ha! I can fool 'em! I planted nothing
but pumpkins, and they will think I'm some kind of expert gardener!"

When it comes to our life as the family of God,

God cannot be mocked in that way.

We cannot live in a way that is aimed at
selfishly enriching or empowering ourselves,
or pridefully burnishing our reputation,

and at the same time tell God,

"Oh, Lord, we did it all for you and your glory!
Don't forget us when we come to the pearly gates."

In the family of God, we reap what we sow.

Now look – Paul is *not* shifting to a works-righteousness model here.

He's not saying that if you plant good seeds you'll be saved
and if you plant bad seeds you'll be damned.

We all need God's grace and forgiveness to be brought into the way of the Spirit.

So don't let this sidetrack you that way.

Paul is speaking in *practical* terms here of everyday community life.

We can't plant seeds of human selfishness and then complain to God
when we don't harvest the fruit of the Spirit.

Remember last week, the fruit of the Spirit?

Love, joy, peace, patience, goodness, gentleness, kindness, and self-control?

And remember the list of awful, degrading, and toxic behaviors
that Paul said were in conflict with the way of the Spirit?

These are the communal outcomes that emerge from the two
life orientations that Paul has been describing.

The message is that throughout our lives,

we either orient ourselves toward God by faith

or toward the human-organized world in opposition to God.

And as we live out of one of those orientations or the other,
we are planting seeds.

Now, here's the profound thing about this analogy:

Seeds don't bear fruit right away.

We only reap the harvest of the seeds we have sown
after a period of time has passed.

So in our experience of this,

we can't tell what the fruit of our faith is immediately.

The pumpkin you sink your carving knife into
was planted something like 4 months ago – back in June.

But the seeds of the spirit and the seeds of the flesh ...

they can sit around for a long time.

There might be seeds we plant that don't bear fruit
until after we are long dead and gone.

[PAUSE]

I am among many in our community and across the country
who are worried about the outcome of the presidential election,
which is now just over two weeks away.

The outcomes that concern me most involve
the increase of animosity between neighbors,
coercive enforcement of selective values, erosion of trust in society,
and further degradation of the touchstones of our democracy.

But what I want to point out in the context of this passage
is that whoever wins, the outcome of this particular election will not,
on its own, realize those concerns
nor will it resolve or eliminate them.

Why not? Because the harvest we reap in the present time was sown decades ago.
As a society we are not a Christian nation, but we do have a lot of Christians
in the nation.

And collectively, we are reaping what we have sown –
seeds of the flesh. Many people who claim to serve Jesus Christ
have sown seeds of selfishness, power-hoarding, and dehumanizing
those we disagree with.

These seeds were planted long before Kamala Harris and Donald Trump
were the least bit involved in politics.

Here's the good part:

By the same principle, as the people of God placed in this society,
we can operate as Spirit people planting seeds of the Spirit
in our community.

This is where the practical teaching of Paul in the first verses of this chapter
come into play.

We can be peacemakers, we can choose the way of love,
we can bear one another's burdens,
we can reject the temptation of comparing ourselves
to others and becoming envious, and in due time we will reap a harvest.

It might take a while,
but change can come when people live out of a new life orientation.

When it comes to this election, don't take the narrow view
that everything hangs on the outcome of this vote. That's not true.

Our situation is the fruit of seeds planted long ago.

If we want something different for our children and grandchildren,
then we need to start planting different seeds now.

Not Republican or Democratic seeds – those are investments
in the same crop we've already got. Seeds of the Spirit.
That's what we are about as a congregation: Together in Christ for all.

[PAUSE]

If we take Paul's wisdom here and try to calculate exactly
what outcome has resulted from what input,
and if we get caught up in judging ourselves
for being a certain way or not being a certain way,
we will be caught in a trap.

We will wonder each day, "Who am I?"

Am I a spirit person or am I a flesh person?

And we'll marshal all the evidence we can to one side or the other
anxiously trying to lock down with certitude,
what kind of seeds we are planting.

Does that sound familiar? If so, then you have something in common
with Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

Bonhoeffer was a great German theologian in the 1930s who opposed
the rise of the Third Reich and organized faith-based resistance
to the horrors of Hitler's ideology.

He was imprisoned and executed just before the end of the war.
Many people who were inspired by his life, then and now, idolized him.
And yet, he knew more than they did about his own experience.

Here's his poem, "Who Am I?"

Who am I? They often tell me
I stepped from my cell's confinement
Calmly, cheerfully, firmly,
Like a Squire from his country house.

Who am I? They often tell me
I used to speak to my warders
Freely and friendly and clearly,
As though it were mine to command.

Who am I? They also tell me
I bore the days of misfortune
Equably, smilingly, proudly,
like one accustomed to win.

Am I, then, really that which other men tell of?
Or am I only what I myself know of myself?
Restless and longing and sick, like a bird in a cage,
Struggling for breath, as though hands were compressing my throat,
Yearning for colors, for flowers, for the voices of birds,
Thirsting for words of kindness, for neighborliness,
Tossing in expectations of great events,
Powerlessly trembling for friends at an infinite distance,
Weary and empty at praying, at thinking, at making,
Faint, and ready to say farewell to it all.

Who am I? This or the Other?
Am I one person today and tomorrow another?
Am I both at once? A hypocrite before others,
And before myself a contemptible woebegone weakling?
Or is something within me still like a beaten army
Fleeing in disorder from victory already achieved?

Who am I? They mock me, these lonely questions of mine.
Whoever I am, Thou knowest, O God, I am thine!

In his own way, Bonhoeffer wrestles with the question of belonging and identity
that we've seen all throughout this letter of Galatians.

Who gets to be called a real child of God?

What do I need to do to inherit God's promise?

Who am I? Where do I belong?

In the final account, what we say or what others say doesn't matter.

What matters is that God knows and that we throw ourselves by faith
into the arms of our Creator.

*God our Creator, our sustaining Spirit, our Redeemer who lived among us,
who died and rose again, knows who we are, and loves us as we are.*

When we believe that God's perspective matters most, that's faith.

When we live by faith, the Spirit becomes alive in us,
and it is the Spirit of the Living God who animates the seeds that we plant.