

Planters and Waterers
February 11 and 12, 2023
Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany

I Corinthians 3 - “I planted, Apollos watered, but God made it grow. Now then, the one who plants isn’t anything, nor the one who waters, but God, Who makes it grow...

Dear Friends in Christ,

A cartoon pictured a husband and wife on the back of a camel. They were trudging through the desert. The wife kept asking, “Are we there yet? Are we there yet?” Finally the man turned around and said, “We will never be there, dear. We’re nomads, remember?”

The Psalmist agreed with that man when he wrote, **Blessed are those whose strength is in you, who have set their hearts on pilgrimage.**

The writer to the Hebrews agreed as well, in the great faith chapter (11). He described Old Testament believers as people who confessed they were strangers and travelers on earth. This morning, I speak to you first of all as one nomad to fellow nomads. As one traveler to companion travelers on our way through all kinds of darkness to New Jerusalem. That eternal destination is described in Revelation 13 as “**the city which has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and its lamp is the Lamb.**”

Our overall theme in this Epiphany season has been “A Season of Light.” We have focused on our assignment to be witnesses to Jesus Christ near and far. Last weekend, our theme was “Salt and Light.” The weekend before that, “You Are Blessed.” Previous to that - “Following and Fishing” / Seeing and Pointing / Rising and Shining.”

Today, our theme is “Planters and Waterers.” The structure of our sermon comes from chapter 6 in Greg Finke’s book, “Joining Jesus on His Mission.” There, he suggests that in order to join Jesus on His redemptive mission, all we have to do is 1) enjoy people, and 2) seek, recognize and respond to what Jesus is already doing in the lives of the people we are enjoying.

Step #1. To be a faithful planter and waterer of God’s Word is to enjoy people.

There's an old saying that God commands us to love people, but that doesn't mean we have to like them. And while there may well be some truth to that statement, the author Greg Finke challenges that idea. He suggests that Jesus not only loved the world enough to die on the cross for them - He was famous for hanging out with people that society considered unlikeable. Finke suggests that Jesus didn't just put up with gluttons and drunkards and prostitutes, He truly befriended them. He didn't ignore the open sinners of his day, He spent time with them. He didn't just hold his nose and drop off a donation at their doorstep, He went in and enjoyed cheeseburgers and fries with them. Or maybe it was cookies and huge dishes of ice cream. You get the idea.

How did Jesus find it within Himself to enjoy folks that others would find unlikeable? Finke answers that He drew deeply upon His Father's grace. In order for Jesus to be a friend of sinners, He first had to have grace for them.

So also for St. Paul as he wrote to the early Christians in Corinth. In chapter 1, Paul referred to them as fellow Christians and God's Church, but in chapter 3 he criticized them for living as people of the flesh, as people who were immature and self-centered. In chapter 1, He calls them people who have been made holy and called to be holy in Christ Jesus, but in chapter 3, He writes them off as sinners not yet ready to eat the solid meat of God's Word, but still needing to be fed with milk out of the bottle. In chapter 1, Paul says they are rich in every spiritual way and He gave thanks to God always for them because of the grace of God that was given to them, but in chapter 3, He described them as sinners full of jealousy and strife. Misguided church members behaving only in a human way - some saying that they followed Paul, their founding pastor, and others saying that they followed Apollos the terrific preacher.

Paul reminded them that he was a planter of the seeds of God's Word and that Apollos was a waterer of those seeds, but it was God's who gave the growth. When Paul says that neither the planter nor the waterer is anything, He is inviting pastors and teachers and Christians in all generations to relax, when it comes time to sow the seeds of God's Word. We can relax because we're not responsible for other people coming to faith or staying in the faith or growing in the faith. That is the work of the Holy Spirit.

In James 3, farmers are lifted up as examples of patience. They prepare the ground, they plant the seeds, they may well cultivate the soil, and then they wait. They wait for the rains to fall and for the sun to shine, trusting that God will grant a harvest in due time.

In the parable of the sower, Jesus pictures Himself and all preachers and teachers of His Word as a farmer who keeps planting the seed. Even if the soil is along the hard pathway where the birds might come along and eat it up. Keep planting. Even if the soil is shallow and in the rocky places where the sun scorches it to death. Keep planting. Even if the soil is full of thorns, which have a tendency of growing up and choking the plants. Keep planting, since you never know when the soil will be good, and the crops will be plentiful.

One of the most common excuses we like to give for not witnessing to our neighbors is that we don't want to come off as preachy or pushy. A second excuse is that we might say the wrong thing and make matters worse. A third excuse is that we already invited them to come to church and they declined. A fourth is that life is busy and we don't want to interfere or be nosy.

Jesus anticipated those kinds of excuses when He explained to His disciples the meaning of the parable of the four soils. The first soil represents people who hear but don't really listen. They go through the motions of hearing, but almost immediately, they let the devil snatch it away from them.

The shallow soil represents those who gladly hear God's Word and believe it, but as time, troubles and trials begin to overwhelm, and they give up the faith without much of a struggle.

The soil full of thorns represents the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth. These seeds grow, but never really thrive. These listeners have a hard time trusting God to provide.

The kingdom of God is like a medium sized congregation not too far away from the Gulf of Mexico, full of folks who keep on supporting the preaching and teaching of God's Word, even when the results are disappointing. They see every day as a mission trip to be lived for the glory of God. They easily enjoy the people in their lives who are easy to love. They keep their sense of humor about the folks who require extra grace. They look for opportunities to spend time with folks whose hearts are broken and hurting. Like all good gardeners, they spend the spring time and summer planting and watering, trusting in God to give the growth.

Step 2 - To be a faithful planter and waterer of God's Word is to be seeking, recognizing, and responding to what Jesus is already doing in the lives of the people we are enjoying.

A story has been told about a shoe company that sent two salesmen to Africa to determine the market potential for their products. One salesman was sent to the east coast of Africa, while the other salesman was sent to the west coast of Africa. Both the salesmen completed a basic survey of the target market and called back to the office. The salesman sent to the east coast of Africa reported: “No one here wears any shoes, there is no market for us here!” The other salesman sent a message “No one here wears any shoes, there is a huge market for us, send inventory fast!”

Today, Jesus isn't asking us to be His sales representatives. He's inviting us to see what He invited His first disciples to see in John 4, **“Open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest.”** When Jesus says that people are ripe for harvest, he simply means that they are ready for good news from God. In verse 9 of today's text, Paul writes, **“He who plants and he who waters are one, and each will receive his wages according to his labor. For we are God's fellow workers. You are God's field, God's building.”**

Here Paul is describing the Church as a vineyard that is planted and tilled by God's workers and belongs to God. The ministers belong to God as His fellow workers, and you, the congregation, belong to God as His field and His building.

In closing, I give you the bad news and the good news regarding this metaphor of what it means to be planters and waterers in God's field.

The bad news comes from Matthew 13, where Jesus tells this parable; **The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field. But while people were sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat and went away. When the wheat came up and formed kernels, then the weeds showed up too...**

When the servants of the master came and asked how it was possible for there to be weeds, when in fact, they had planted only good seeds? The Master replied, **“An enemy has done this.”**

When asked to explain, Jesus explained **“that the field is the world, and the good seed is the sons of the kingdom. The weeds are the sons of the evil one, and the enemy who sowed them is the devil.”**

Imagine what the average farmer would do if he caught his rival planting ragweed into his freshly planted wheat fields. Imagine what the average gardener would do if he caught his nasty neighbor planting crabgrass into his vegetable patch.

The bad news is bad in these end times, but the Good News is better. The devil and his demons are out and about sowing discord and disobedience and ugliness that is as contagious as it can be. But our Savior is as beautiful as He has always been, and in Him there is mercy that is fresh as the morning dew. There are second chances one right after the other at the foot of His cross. And there are new beginnings in the glorious light of His empty tomb.

The bad news these days is bad, but the Good News is better. Our sinful flesh is weak, but God's love is stronger. The natural inclinations in every congregation are towards selfishness and division and crabbiness and orneriness and "my way or the highway" attitudes. But in Christ, there is the forgiveness of sins. In the Holy Christian Church, there is one baptism, one faith, one Lord, one Great Commission.

The bad news is bad, but the Good News is better. Day after day, the sinful world beckons us to choose evil. And bad choices have their way of turning hearts down dark pathways, where the old evil foe lurks and stalks like an angry lion, seeking whom he may devour.

But the Good News is as good as it's ever been. The same Jesus Who defeated the devil and all of His nasty demons in the Garden of Gethsemane and at the cross is out and about in every corner of our neighborhoods. He is out and about as the unseen guest at every one of your meals, the careful listener to every one of your conversations, the attentive friend in every one of your relationships, and the perfect teacher in every one of your mistakes, and the lover of every one of your souls.

The kingdom of God is like a congregation full of folks who have their bad days, their good days, and their really good days. On their bad days, they keep Good News to themselves, they're too busy to spend time in God's Word, and they drag themselves through the day, chanting to themselves, "Nothing new, same old, same old." On their good days, they begin the day with sign of the cross, they confess their unworthiness before God, the grace of God sweeps over their hearts and souls, they realize that Jesus is with them and He is for them. On their really good days, they live as if they are on a mission trip arranged by Christ Himself. On every day, they rejoice that they are the precious and dearly loved people of God. In Jesus' Name. Amen.