

Aiming for the Harvest

Communion

October 4, 2020

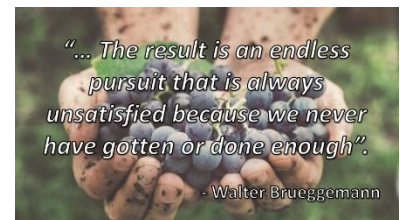
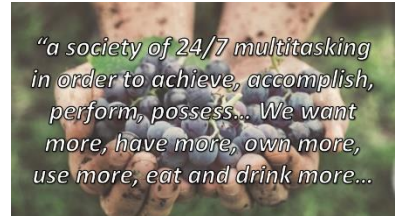
Matthew 21: 33-46

³³ "Listen to another parable. There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a wine press in it, and built a watchtower. Then he leased it to tenants and went to another country. ³⁴ When the harvest time had come, he sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his produce. ³⁵ But the tenants seized his slaves and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. ³⁶ Again he sent other slaves, more than the first; and they treated them in the same way. ³⁷ Finally he sent his son to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.' ³⁸ But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, 'This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance.' ³⁹ So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him. ⁴⁰ Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?" ⁴¹ They said to him, "He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the harvest time."

⁴² Jesus said to them, "Have you never read in the scriptures: 'The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord's doing, and it is amazing in our eyes'? ⁴³ Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom. ⁴⁴ The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls". ⁴⁵ When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they realized that he was speaking about them. ⁴⁶ They wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowds, because they regarded him as a prophet.

Philippians 3: 4b-14

If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: ⁵ circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; ⁶ as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. ⁷ Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. ⁸ More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ ⁹ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. ¹⁰ I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, ¹¹ if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead. ¹² Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. ¹³ Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, ¹⁴ I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

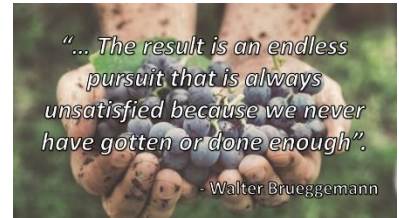
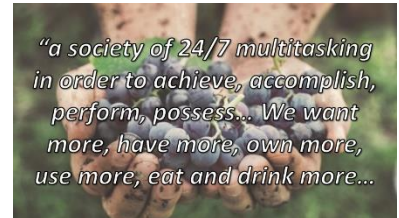


This morning, we take aim at the harvest. As we do so, we begin with the common, worldly view of the harvest.



Walter Brueggemann, an Old Testament scholar, describes our culture as:

"a society of 24/7 multitasking in order to achieve, accomplish, perform, possess... We want more, have more, own more, use more, eat and drink more. The result is an endless pursuit that is always unsatisfied because we never have gotten or done enough".

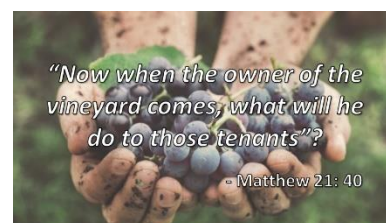


As you consider the world around you and perhaps even your own life, does this statement ring true? Do you know people who fit this description? Or maybe this statement stings a little bit. Maybe we see ourselves in this statement. These words from Brueggemann reflect the way much of the world currently lives on a day to day basis. More, more, more. For many people, the endless chasing after 'more' is never-ending and, in the end, it never truly satisfies. But our lives do not have to follow our culture's ways or society's norms. We were not created by God to simply seek more and more stuff. Created by God, yes, our souls do long for more. But our souls long for something deeper, stronger, higher, and longer lasting than what we receive from simply accumulating more wealth, more possessions, more accolades. As followers of Christ, the harvest that we should aim for is eternal, not temporal. As we begin this new sermon series, "Thriving", I invite you to journey each Sunday with me as we explore our relationship with God and others as well as our relationship with our things, our time, our resources, and our talents. Let us pray...

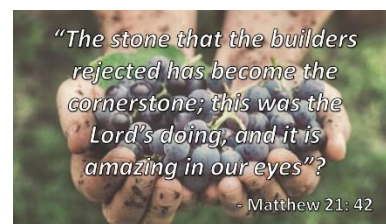


Please turn with me to Matthew 21. We will be beginning in verse 33. This passage is like many of Jesus' parables: the meaning is not easily grasped or readily available. As a good practice and as a way to add depth and to your understanding of today's parable, I invite you to begin at the start of chapter 21 and to study how the previous five sections or stories build into today's passage. Delve into your Bibles and see how the triumphal entry and clearing of the temple tie into the cursing of the fig tree. From there, explore how the questioning of Jesus' authority leads into the parable of the two sons and on into today's passage. Even for the religious leaders, they only "get it" at the end of today's parable. It is then that they realize, "Oh, Jesus is talking about us".

The parable is about a landowner and the tenants who betray him. The landowner built a vineyard and leased it out. At harvest time it was customary to give a portion of the harvest to the landowner. As the story goes, the slaves who were sent to collect the owner's share were beaten, killed, and stoned – not once but twice. So, the landowner sends his son. Instead of respecting the son, the tenants see eliminating him as the path to inheriting the vineyard. The tenants kill the son too. At this point, Jesus asks, *"Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?"* The religious leaders' response comes quickly: *"He will put those wretches to a miserable death"*. How many of us would answer the same? Even if many of us would not suggest putting them to death, I think almost all of us would think they deserved some type of consequence or punishment. Would you agree?



Up until the point of application, most people there that day thought this was a teaching or a warning about greed. Some of us here today might think so as well. But it is not. In verse 42 Jesus shifts his focus from the crowd gathered around him that day to the religious leaders, both past and present. Here he says, *"Have you never read in the scriptures: 'The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord's doing, and it is amazing in our eyes'?"*. Jesus is speaking of the prophets that have been rejected, abused, and even killed in the past and he is also speaking about his future as well. It is about now that the chief priests and Pharisees are realizing that Jesus is talking about them. These religious leaders are the tenants charged with caring for the vineyard and who are responsible for the fruit it produces. The vineyard is Israel and the fruit are the people of faith. As the passage concludes, Jesus is clear that the kingdom will be taken from them and given to those who produce fruit for the kingdom. As we as a church participate in a generosity campaign this month, this is a great thing to think about ourselves. The questions or things for us as a community of faith to think about as we enter this month would be these: As a church, are we producing fruit for the kingdom of God? As your pastor, along with the leaders of the church, are we leading in a way that produces fruit for the kingdom of God? These questions may be a bit hard to answer in this pandemic season, but I believe we can answer them.



Last week I met with Cindy and Nancy, our treasurer and the chair of our Finance team, respectively, to discuss the church's finances and to begin to think about the 2021 budget.

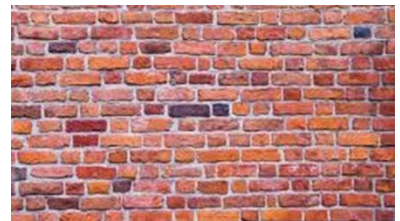
First of all, there is good news. The church is stable, and our finances are solid, especially for the season that we have all been in. As we consider our finances, part of our finances or our budget goes to brick and mortar items: the building and salaries, to utilities and communications, and so on. Another “piece” of our budget goes towards being in ministry or to fund programs that allow ministry to happen. Both of these financial commitments go towards producing fruit for the kingdom of God. “Fruit” comes in two ways, primarily.

The most important fruit comes in producing disciples. That fruit can be tracked by church attendance, baptisms, weddings, and other such metrics. The other way we produce fruit is by growing closer to Jesus ourselves. This is harder to track. In our discussion last Tuesday, we talked about this harder to track aspect of ministry. As one example, we talked about programs such as “Art with a Heart” and our after-school program. The church obviously invests money in these programs – staffing, supplies, snacks, and so on. But it is hard to track this fruit. The number of children in these programs does not necessarily correlate with things like church attendance or baptisms. But these programs do the vital work of teaching children about the love of Jesus, of planting seeds of faith in little hearts, and of beginning to connect families to our community of faith.

In Jesus’ eyes, that was the work that the religious leaders were failing to do - not only with the children but with the general population as well. The temple had become a place for saints and not for sinners. The religious leaders welcomed those who were “clean” and those who already knew God. The poor, the hungry, the least, the lost, the broken – well, they were another story.

In Luke 19:10, Jesus himself identifies this focus. Here he says, *"For the Son of Man came to seek out and save the lost"*. The concept of making disciples, of bringing people into a saving relationship, is the focus of most of Jesus' teachings and actions. As a church, this needs to be the harvest that we aim for as well. While we may not know if we hit the specific target with any of the children in our after-school programs, we do know that they are experiencing the love of Christ when they are in these programs at our church. Experiencing the love of Christ is the first step in becoming a disciple of Jesus Christ.

As we turn to Philippians 3, Paul begins our passage for this morning with a list of his own accolades. It is quite the list: circumcised on the eighth day, from the tribe of Benjamin, a Pharisee among Pharisees, blameless perfect keeper of the Law. It is quite the list – for those who keep track of such things. As Saul he certainly kept track. It was about who was "in" and who was "out" of God's family. There was a clear line in the sand, a tangible wall that defined who was acceptable in God's sight and who was not. When he was living this life, Saul was arrogant and prideful. His focus was on himself and on those in his circles.



But in verse seven Paul admits, *"these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ"*. The titles, the accolades, the things that separated him from all of those who needed to know God – Paul now considers those things *"rubbish"*. It was for Christ's sake and for the mission of the gospel that Paul cast all of these things aside. As Paul's faith grew, he came to the place of understanding that all the

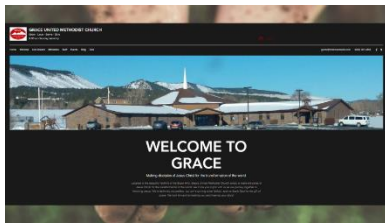
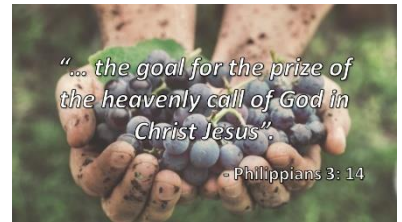
titles, the accolades, the privileges – all were hinderances to loving others as Jesus loved them. He was willing to regard all these worldly things as loss for the sake of gaining Christ. As I thought about that, I wondered about what I need to let go of, about what I need to consider rubbish, in order to better gain Christ. What lines do I try to draw in the sand, what walls do I try to build up that limit my faith and, more importantly, my ability to really love others as Jesus would have me love them? What lines or walls do you need to cast aside, to tear down?



In the remainder of the passage, Paul speaks of the "*gain*" he finds in knowing Christ and of the goal that his whole life has now been oriented towards. In knowing

Christ, Paul has come to know the righteousness of Christ. Through faith – not by following the Law – Paul has heard the call to righteous living. It is in righteous living that Paul has found joy and contentment, true meaning in life. As Saul, it was about holding onto what he had. It was about keeping the circle tight and persecuting those that threatened to cross the line or to break down the wall. It was a life without joy, without real meaning, without love. For Paul, as one who had been changed by Jesus, life was now about giving Jesus away, about inviting one and all to know the Savior. It was a life of service and love, a life full of meaning and purpose. Paul was living a life that was making a tangible difference in the lives of the unsaved, the lost, the broken, the hurting. Paul was willing to allow God to lead him and he was committed to giving all of himself for the building of the kingdom of God. Doing so, Paul produced a lot of fruit. Along the way, Paul knew that he was pursuing his ultimate goal.

It is there at the end of the passage, in verse 14: *"the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus"*. This is the goal for all of us, isn't it? Along the way, though, we must produce fruit. We must be involved in the work of making disciples for the transformation of the world.



Does anyone recognize this? Yes, this is our church web site. Right there near the top, almost the first thing you see as you scroll down, is the that reason Grace United Methodist Church exists. The mission statement is this: "Making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world". That is the mission statement of the global United Methodist Church as well. I want to read the paragraph underneath this morning. We will blow it up a bit to make it more readable. Read it with me. It says,



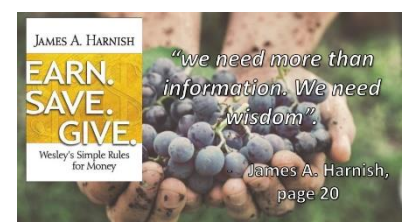
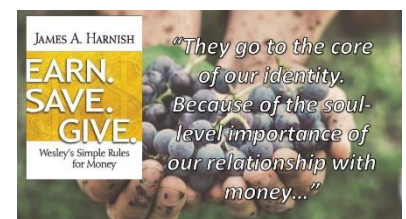
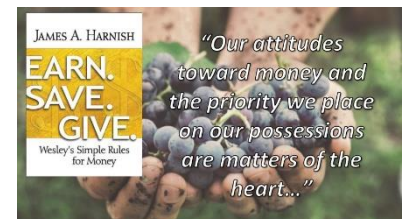
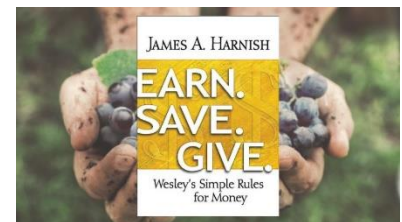
"Located in the beautiful foothills of the Black Hills, Grace United Methodist Church exists to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. We invite you to join with us as we journey together in following Jesus. We're definitely not perfect, but we're striving to be faithful, and we thank God for the gift of grace. We look forward to meeting you and hearing your story!"

As we begin this journey together, I wanted to remind us all of this purpose. This week you should receive a letter in the mail. It will tell about the ways that Grace is seeking to make disciples and about how we are inviting others to journey with us. I spoke earlier of our after-school programs, which we plan to begin again in November, along with Children's Church. These programs, like our after school programs, aim at beginning young hearts on their journey towards discipleship. The letter will share other ways that Grace is seeking to make disciples and to change lives. As you read the letter and consider your response to the invitation to be a part of this effort to make disciples, I invite you to dream and to envision how you can further our efforts to build the kingdom of God here on earth.

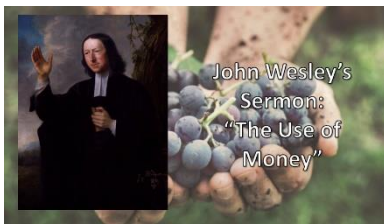
As I work through this series that invites us to consider our generous response to God's many blessings and gifts in our lives, I will be including some thoughts from this book, Earn. Save. Give. by James Harnish. It is a modern retelling of Methodist founder John Wesley's rules for money. Towards the beginning of chapter one, Harnish writes these words:

"Our attitudes towards money and the priority we place on our possessions are matters of the heart; they go to the core of our identity. Because of the soul-level importance of our relationship with money, we need more than information. We need wisdom".

- James A. Harnish, page 20



As we journey together through October, we will be talking about matters of the heart and about wisdom in our relationship with our money, resources, and talents. As we do so, it is my hope and prayer that we all gain a good measure of wisdom concerning our relationships with money, as well as with our time and talents. The title of this book may surprise some. John Wesley was not against money or the accumulation of it. In fact, next week I will share from chapter two, entitled "Earn All You Can". He saw the value of money, especially as it applied to ministry. To illustrate this, hear this quote from John Wesley himself. It comes from his sermon, "The Use of Money".



"In the hands of his children, it is food for the hungry, drink for the thirsty, raiment for the naked... By it we may supply the place of a husband to the widow, and of a father to the fatherless; we may be a defense of the oppressed, a means of health to the sick, of ease to them that are in pain. It may be as eyes to the blind, as feet to the lame; yea, a lifter up from the gates of hell!"

The resources of our church and the gifts and the abilities of those who call Grace United Methodist Church home have the power to be eyes to the blind, to be love to the broken, a father to the fatherless, to be food for the hungry in spirit. Together we have the capacity to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. The church needs us all to be a part. As we consider this call to Christian stewardship, this invitation to generosity, it is done amidst a time unlike any other. These are uncertain times. I am well aware of this. Yet God is faithful.

As we begin this journey together, I would like to share a story that illustrates how God remains faithful and at work in our world and in our church, sometimes in spite of us.



When Grace received word that Karl was being appointed to a church in Bismarck, North Dakota, one quick realization was that Michelle would be moving too.

Yes, a new pastor would come. But there was going to be a void in the children's and youth programs. The Staff Parish team began to advertise for someone or a couple of someones to replace Michelle. Even before I arrived here, Jerry was hired to lead our youth program. That was a blessing. It is a blessing. But the hole in the children's program remained. Once I got to know a few people, I did have a couple of conversations with potential prospects. But these did not lead to any applicants. Even so, the hope that the right person would come along was covered in prayer. As time moved on and no one applied for the job, I and those on Staff Parish and leadership began to wonder what else we could do. Finally, at the September meeting, Staff Parish decided to put the position on hold and to reopen the position in January.

I was not totally ready to give up on finding someone, but I did understand the logic of their decision. That was Tuesday, September 15. After the meeting I thought, "There are certainly people in the church with the gifts and abilities to lead the Children's Ministry Coordinator position". In my heart, I wondered what God was up to, what God might be doing, what God might be saying to us.

Yes, there were several capable people, but the timing was not right, we were in the pandemic... It just felt like it was not to be at that point.

Part of Christianity is stepping out in faith. During this sermon series I will invite you to join me and our church leaders in stepping out in faith. As part of this month's generosity campaign you too will be asked to step out in faith. Stepping out in faith is part of our call as Christians. This morning I want to close with a story about two of our own stepping out in faith. Just to review, on Tuesday night the church's leadership decided to suspend looking for a Children's Ministry Coordinator. Well, guess what? The phone rang on Wednesday morning - the very next day. Turns out that God had been at work right along. A wonderfully gifted woman from the church called to share that God was working on her heart. She shared that she was feeling called to step into the role of Children's Ministry Coordinator. She definitely has the gifts and abilities, the compassion and love for children and for Jesus. But to leave the full-time job that she had held for 32 years, to step into a leadership role at the church – it would be a huge change. Yet God was leading her. God was not just working on her heart. She discussed it with her husband, and he was totally supportive. It was quite a change of heart that God had worked in him as well.

She applied, and as you heard earlier, and we hired Kelly Carter as our new Children's Ministry director this past week. Part of the mission of our church has been to reach out into the communities connected to Grace, specifically to the children, youth, and young families. This is definitely one of our church's aims for the harvest. We have added a piece to that puzzle and will begin to refocus and

sharpen our aim as we plan and shape and form ministry that is aiming for the harvest. I cannot wait to see what God does in and through Kelly as we seek to be in ministry to the children and families in our community and beyond. I cannot wait to see what God does in and through Grace. Thanks be to God. Amen.

GPS – Grow, Pray, Study

- 1) *Grow*. In your life, is Jesus more like the cornerstone (the foundation) or more like a millstone (that which weighs you down)? How could he be more of a cornerstone? How must you refocus to accomplish this change?
- 2) *Pray*. What “confidences in the flesh” are diverting your trust from God these days? Pray for victory over these things that prevent the spread of the gospel.
- 3) *Study*. Read Matthew 22: 1-14. When did you first come to the banquet table of Jesus Christ? How might your story help others to find their place?