

Bringing in the Sheaves

Luke 14:7-24 by Patty Friesen (Sept 4, 2016)

From Like a Garden by Sara Covin Juengst, p. 82-100

Harvest time! We long for it. It is the culmination of all our soil preparation, planting, watering, weeding, waiting, transplanting and more weeding. Finally all the work has paid off as we witness on the vegetables on the tables in the lobby. The result of our labour spills onto our kitchen counters in a splendid cornucopia of red tomatoes, yellow squash, green cucumbers, purple eggplant, white cauliflower and golden corn. We all agree that there is no flavor grocery stores can produce like the flavor out there in the lobby.

In biblical times, harvests took place almost year round. Flax was harvested from March to April. Barley harvest came in May followed by wheat in June. In August, the summer fruits, figs, grapes and pomegranates were gathered and the olives from September to November.

When biblical writers mention harvesting, they are generally referring to the reaping of the two most important grains, barley and wheat. When the wheat and barley were ready, the harvest had to be completed as quickly as possible. Everyone in the family had to help and there were fewer equipment breakdowns using sickles and winnowing forks. Grain was cut off close to the heads and taken to the village threshing floor where the husks were broken off or threshed by the feet of animals or sledges. Winnowing, separating wheat from husks or chaff was done by throwing it in the air with forks. After the winnowing, the grain was stored in pits, silos, cellars, granaries and public storehouses.

The grape harvest began with cutting bunches of grapes and throwing them into the wine press, which consisted of two pits hewn out of the rocky ground. The grapes were crushed by the feet of laborers in one pit and the juice flowed into the other pit. It was a very noisy occasion. The juice was made into wine and vinegar.

Harvest time was a time of unrestrained joy. Isaiah uses the harvest to picture the joy the people will have at the coming messiah: they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest. There were three thanksgiving festivals connected with harvest to remind the people to express gratitude to God for bountiful harvests and to renew their commitment to the one who had enabled them to eat their fill.

The Feast of Unleavened Bread occurred in May with the barley harvest. The first of the barley was offered to God in Leviticus 23:10. The celebration lasted for seven days and about a week later, the wheat harvest began. The barley and wheat harvesting continued until the Feast of Weeks, fifty days after the first barley was offered to God. The Feast of Weeks was a true harvest festival and people brought the produce of their gardens and fields into the temple. The Greeks called it Pentecost because it came 50 days after the first barley and the people brought two loaves and two lambs to sacrifice and then the community ate together, including the poor, strangers and Levites, emphasizing the sharing of God's good gifts. A parallel would be the fall supper we hope to host for the Osler community as a fundraiser for our refugee family where the whole town comes out hopefully. If folks are able to help plan or cook for that, please come to our planning meeting this Thursday.

The third festival, the Feast of Booths was celebrated in the autumn after the olive harvest and lasted seven days and every participant built a small tent to sleep in at night.

The tents, constructed of branches and vines were replicas of the small huts that people built in the fields and slept in to protect the olive orchards from thieves and wild animals. They were reminders of the time Israel spent in temporary shelters during the wilderness wanderings.

The importance of these thanksgiving feasts are emphasized time and again in scripture. It seems silly to have to remind communities to eat together and celebrate but God was worried about their self-reliance and their forgetting to feast with poor people. The gleaning laws in Deuteronomy and Leviticus reminded the people that just as God's generosity and grace extended to them, so they were to leave grain and vegetables for the poor to harvest.

Paul used the metaphor of harvest in the New Testament as well. His phrase to the Galatians that you reap whatever you sow has become a favourite slogan of preachers and politicians. It has been called the law of the identical harvest. If you sow corn, you harvest corn, not potatoes. Spiritual gardening works the same way. Anger, jealousy and enmity breed more anger, jealousy and enmity. It is when we learn to plant the seeds of the fruit of the Spirit, love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self control and nourish them into maturity that we will reap a harvest of righteousness, peace within ourselves and hopefully with other people as well.

Paul expresses the humility of harvest in 1 Corinthians 3:7 saying, "neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth." This expresses a humility in his ministry that I find hard to emulate as I brag around the conference about our beautiful building and that I worked with Zac Stafaniuk this summer and the fact that we've hired the terrific Terri Lynn and that the mayor of Osler

and the next mayor of Saskatoon are members at my church. It's alright to be proud of our church but it kind of makes Patrick feel bad about his church. We are faithful in our efforts as harvesters in the Garden of God but still remember who the real Gardener is.

The wonderful old phrase "harvest home" had three meanings in agrarian societies. It meant the end of the harvest season when all the crops are brought home for winter storage. Shakespeare had this meaning in mind when he compared a certain lord's newly shaved chin to a stubble land at harvest home in King Henry IV. The second meaning of harvest home is a thanksgiving festival that accompanies the storage of grain and the third meaning of harvest home is a harvest song, sung by threshers as the very last load was brought in. I don't actually hear our farmers singing as I visit farmyards these days. I guess they wait for us to sing in church.

Harvest home is a beloved metaphor for the anticipation of our union with Christ at the end of the age as well. James chapter 5 describes the anticipation of our spiritual harvest. Be patient, therefore, beloved, until the coming of the Lord. The farmer waits for the precious crop from the earth, being patient with it until it receives the early and the late rains. You also must be patient. Strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near. John also describes the harvest that will take place in the new heaven and new earth, where God wipes away tears and death and mourning and pain. In Revelation 21 the harvest comes not from fields of grain but from the tree of life with its leaves for the healing of the nations.

C.S. Lewis in the last Narnia book, the Last Battle, drew on this image from Revelation for his description of a place the children reach at the end of their adventures: At last, they saw a smooth green hill. Its sides were as steep as the sides of a pyramid

and round the very top of it ran a green wall but above the wall rose the branches of trees, whose leaves looked like silver and their fruit like gold. ‘Further up and further in!’ roared the Unicorn and no one held back...Only when they had reached the very top did they slow up; that was because they found themselves facing great golden gates. And for a moment none of them was bold enough to try if the gates would open. They all felt just as they had felt about the fruit – dare we? Is it right? Can it be meant for us?”

Can it be meant for us? It is meant for all of us. The harvest home is for all to come to sit at that great Thanksgiving table – a table that is the ultimate gift of God; a harvest home of good things, a celebration of the bountiful love and overwhelming generosity of the Gardener who cares for us, and sustains us. As the psalmist says, The earth has yielded its increase; God, our God has blessed us. May God continue to bless us; let all the ends of the earth bring reverence. Let us pray...

Thank you Gracious God for your goodness to us at all times. Thank you for harvest times, for the times that come after long waiting, for the birth of children and new jobs and new school terms and new opportunities that come our way. Help us to remember your grace and always give thanks, Amen.