

You Reap What You Sow
Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany
February 16, 2014
Gordon Wiersma

Texts: Deut. 30:15-20; Matt. 5:21-37

‘You reap what you sow’ – I have been thinking lately about how true that is, the wisdom expressed in that cultural – even biblical? – proverb; ‘you reap what you sow’ – I’ve been thinking lately about what a bunch of malarkey that is, how that idea can be cruel and even harmful for someone to be told or to impose on many life circumstances. ‘You reap what you sow’ – so which is it, truth or malarkey, wisdom or cruelty? Well, that’s what I’ve been thinking about... thinking about with these texts that the lectionary offers to us this morning for God’s Spirit to speak to us.

‘You reap what you sow’ – well, what that is really on a basic level is simply an ‘if/then’ way of looking at the world, at life – it’s just saying that if you sow corn, then you reap corn; if you sow weeds, you reap weeds – that’s your pretty basic agriculture. And so then in life if you sow good you reap good; you sow bad you reap bad – pretty basic life understanding: if/then.

And the passage from Deuteronomy is a perfect example of that very kind of ‘reap what you sow’ perspective on life – the ‘if/then’ worldview in what God declares to the people of Israel is plain to see, and the passage can simply speak for itself:

*See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. ¹⁶**If** you obey the commandments of the LORD your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the LORD your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, **then** you shall live and become numerous, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess. ¹⁷**But if** your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, ¹⁸**I** declare to you today that (**then**) you shall perish; you shall not live long in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess.*

Clear enough: if you do good, then you will live and prosper; if you don't, then you won't. It is a choice for a person, a people, a nation to make – the choices that lead toward life or death, blessing or curse. Life and death is at stake in this encounter and call - and the plea from God is powerful and poignant: 'choose life!' – for you will reap what you sow.

I started this sermon expressing both the truth and the malarkey that I hear in 'reap what you sow' – but maybe you get a little more nervous about my malarkey conjectures when it is God who is promoting this 'if/then' point of view. Although I think you know what I'm getting at – times when 'reap what you sow' resonates and times when it seems to make no sense at all. And clearly with that strong word from Deuteronomy we have to sort that through somehow. But before I get too specific about that, let's just still let that simmer there for a while – and as that percolates we'll turn to a different perspective.

Because I think Jesus' words in Matthew jolt us into a very different point of view. With the Sermon on the Mount, you'll often hear the passages just before this one - the Beatitudes and the 'salt & light' images – in the lectionary the last couple of weeks. But today's passage not so much – hellfire/prison/losing eyes & limbs/some more hell/divorce/adultery/swearing – everything that before was poetic and evocative here turns harsh and provocative. And to use the lens I've offered for today, I'd say that this passage is a sort of 'if/then' nightmare – can you see what I mean?

Jesus says – so you want to follow the law? OK – well if you want to follow 'do not murder' to avoid judgment, then here's what you have to do too: then you can't be angry; you can't insult someone; you can't call anyone a fool or it's hellfire for you; you can't leave a dispute simmering – anyone in church right now that has an unresolved conflict needs to leave and go take care of that before we continue...how many of us could stay? – I'd need to go; and for good measure Jesus says that if you don't negotiate with your accusers then you'll end up penniless in prison. How's that for 'if/then'?!

And if you want to follow ‘you shall not commit adultery’ then that also means any feeling of lust is forbidden. So if that’s ever an issue, tear out your eye, cut off your hand – it’s better than hell. Interestingly it only talks about men here, but let’s be egalitarian and include everyone – and I don’t mean to be flippant or morbid, but honestly with this ‘if/then’ how many eyes and limbs would be left? And if you want to follow the divorce laws, you better start certifying adultery; and if you want to be true to your word, then stop with all the bravado, and just say YES, or NO.

It’s all an ‘if/then’ theater of the absurd.

So what’s going on here? That’s a good question – there’s a reason this passage is less seldom AND less seldom preached on! But clearly Jesus is not trying to diss or be sarcastic about the law. In the transition from the Beatitudes and ‘salt & light’ to this passage, Jesus says he has come not to abolish the law but to fulfill it and that every letter of the law is to be followed and taught – a righteousness to exceed the most religious. And then comes this ‘if/then’ law twilight zone. Well, Jesus does seem to enjoy surprising people, keeping them off balance – you never know if it will be the poetic or the provocative tack he takes – and here it seems to me that Jesus is making a point to get to what is at the heart of the law, getting to the spirit and purpose of why God gives the law. Jesus makes clear that if we want to get into an ‘if/then’ competition with the law no one is going to win – really saying that if we want to use the law as another way to divide up who’s good or bad, who’s in or out, then we’re all going to hell anyway. Saying I think, that with every letter of the law, where is it meant to direct us? - into this ‘if/then’ nightmare? or back to the Beatitudes, to salt & light? It seems to me that we have to link this back to the ‘if/then’ of the Beatitudes, of salt & light, because that is yet another sort of ‘if/then’ picture that was given. Those blessings and images are an ‘if/then’, a ‘reaping what you sow’, not calculated by the measures of human standards –and not even measured by the pass/fail of a law list - but by the measures of the kingdom of God, the reign of life Jesus reveals. The Beatitudes are not quaint or optimistic platitudes, they are the deep often difficult wisdom through which Jesus reveals the fulfillment of every

letter of the law – we are created to live in the upside down calculations of God’s reign of life, to know ourselves created to be blessing, salt and light, for God’s world.

And I think that word from Jesus sends us back to Deuteronomy - it takes us back to hear something essential going on in God’s word to God’s covenant people – something more that is present in the ‘if/then’ laid out there. This word from God is not just a cause and effect calculation, but a declaration of who and how God has created God’s people to be: the choice given is at the core about trusting God, entrusting life to God’s ways of life, rejecting the false paths of death.

Because it’s time now that we do just put all the cards out on the table for this ‘reap what you sow’, ‘if/then’, view of life. There are a whole lot of times when people actually do not reap at all what they sow, good or bad – when bad things happen to those who have sought the best – when those who sow nothing good at all reap power and plenty – far too often every day that those innocent by age or circumstance reap suffering and death – too often life does not match an equation of faithfulness leading to blessing and waywardness leading to ruin (and there is plenty of Scripture that speaks to that reality too). There is no simple ‘reap/sow’, ‘if/then’, for life.

But what there is, is choosing life with God, trusting God, trusting God’s ways, or not.

I have a friend who told me about some struggles in life in a way that has stuck with me in a profound way. This person dealt with addiction, with an aimless path for life, choices that were starting to endanger connections of family, of purpose, of life. And then my friend said that the realization, the conversion, that came was this: “I need to trust God – I need to follow God’s ways; that’s what I realized, that’s what I had to do; trusting God was the change – that’s what gave me the way.” That is choosing life! Since then this person has still had plenty of challenge and difficulty, but I see the way of blessing, commitment and love that this person has brought to and received in life – how that continues each day.

That's real life – real choice – real trust. I think about a lot about what that friend taught me. "I need to trust God - that's what gave me the way."

And that gets us to something profound to see through that 'if/then' lens. What Deuteronomy calls out is our only hope, our only path and choice for true life. In the midst of all of the uncertainties and unfairness, all the challenges and hopes of life, where will we put our trust? What we say for ourselves, what we teach to our children, what we witness to our world is this: trust God – entrust your life to God – choose life – and know that is how God has created us to live, and God will give us blessing in it; God will use us for blessing through it. That's how we hear Deuteronomy echoed in Matthew – that every letter of the law is essential, not to trap us in an 'if/then' nightmare, but to call us to put our trust in God: to have our lives guided by the paths of God's kingdom, by the ways of life that are enduring, blessed, true.

I'll wrap this up this way – if you saw the sermon title "You Reap What You Sow" for these lectionary passages, the best guess for the focus would not be Deuteronomy and Matthew but the I Corinthians text – that's the one where Paul actually uses a 'plant/water/grow' image. And here's the thing, does Paul say 'you reap what you sow'? – NO! Paul says: 'all you do is sow, and God grows.' That is the true 'if/then' of faith that we walk in: 'if we trust God is faithful, then we can be faithful too'; 'if we know the good news of Jesus Christ, then we can entrust our lives to God.'

'You reap what you sow'? – yes – no – maybe so. But much more than an 'if/then' equation and even much more than a law, what God speaks is a calling: to trust in God and to live as God has made us to be, as God in Christ has freed us to be. It's what my friend taught me given to us as a new beatitude: 'blessed are those who trust in God, for God will show them the way'. Thanks be to God. AMEN.