

Ecclesiastes 3:1-4 For everything there is a season and a time for every matter under heaven:

² a time to be born and a time to die; a time to plant and a time to pluck up what is planted;

³ a time to kill and a time to heal; a time to break down and a time to build up;

⁴ a time to weep and a time to laugh; a time to mourn and a time to dance;

Galatians 6:7-10 ⁷ Do not be deceived; God is not mocked, for you reap whatever you sow. ⁸ If you sow to your own flesh, you will reap corruption from the flesh, but if you sow to the Spirit, you will reap eternal life from the Spirit. ⁹ So let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up. ¹⁰ So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all and especially for those of the family of faith.

2 Corinthians 9:6, 10-11 The one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully.

¹⁰ He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness. ¹¹ You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity, which will produce thanksgiving to God.

Matthew 9:36-38 Jesus, ³⁶ when he saw the crowds, had compassion for them because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. ³⁷ Then he said to his disciples, *“The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; ³⁸ therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.”*

SERMON: The Lord of the Harvest

I love this familiar passage from Ecclesiastes 3 about the seasons in life. It was brought to mind as I considered what to say for today as we prepare to celebrate the Autumn harvest. It begins with a time to be born and a time to die... This reminds me of Jesus who, knowing that his time was growing short on earth, taught in **John 12:24** that *“unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain, but if it dies it bears much fruit.”* This is one of his many teachings that seems to turn our understanding of death on its ear, for we do not usually think of death bearing much fruit. And yet out of his death and crucifixion the Church was born, and the fruit of freedom from the power of sin and death was achieved!

There are all manner of deaths in our world. I think the worst death is the death of hope, and right before that is the death of peace. When our peace is removed, it is only hope that is left to sustain us. If hope dies too, then life soon follows. With hope, *joy and celebration die*, as well as the enjoyment and sharing of our many blessings. Therefore we, as Christians, hold tightly to hope, even in seasons of death. There is much that is perishing in our world today, but because of the coming of Jesus Christ, hope is not one of those things! We can perhaps see the blessings of *death and rebirth* most clearly in the season of autumn, the time when leaves fall to the ground and crops are harvested. We look upon the striking beauty of fall colors and bountiful fields, knowing that what follows may truly look bleak. The dark trees, stripped of their leaves...the empty fields with the winds blowing the dirt about, stripping the fields of essential topsoil... In the moment, during the heart of winter, the land is exposed, looking desolate.

And yet, as the seasons change once more, life springs anew from the ground and the trees begin to bud, *reviving hope* when winter has seemed to last forever.

I would say that winter has been here for the Christian Church for far too long. As our focus upon the work God called us to has shifted from *growing disciples* to growing in numbers, as the *production and profit attitude* of our culture has taken hold within the Church in these past decades, we have been witnessing what some believe to be the death of the Church. I would argue that what is dying is not the Church but our stunted view of what constitutes the work of the Church, the body of Christ, in this world. And that is a much-needed death if we are to be fruitful in Christ once more.

After all, what was it that Christ commissioned his followers to do right before he ascended? According to [Matthew 28:18-20a](#), he spoke these words:

“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit ²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.”

The Church’s stunted focus on growth in numbers must die if the work of the body of Christ is to reap a bountiful harvest, as must our focus on prosperity of the individual and our perpetual comparison of ourselves against others – whether we compare ourselves to other people or our church to other churches. It is long past our time to let unfruitful practices and perceptions die. It is time to die to the evil ways of this world that encourage us to *rest in our blessedness*. **That is not what Christ did** – he sent out his followers to gather the harvest and care for those who were gathered, instructing his disciples to teach them obedience to Christ’s commands.

So, if we in the body of Christ are to live into our calling, we must sow abundantly all our blessings just as we have been abundantly blessed. It is not just in times of poverty but also in our blessed abundance it is the time to stand upon the promises of God of which I have been preaching. At all times we can proclaim Christ’s *message of salvation and reconciliation* to our friends, our family, our neighbors. Even in times of great loss – ESPECIALLY in times of great loss – it is this hope that gives us strength to make it through the dark times and await the dawn, the return of the light and a return of fruitfulness and a sense of our blessedness in Christ Jesus.

The season of Thanksgiving fast approaches, followed by a time of anticipatory waiting for the coming of Jesus Christ. This season of worship is our time to heal – both within ourselves and alongside our neighbors, who may be struggling in life, in faith, or from the death of a loved one so close to the holidays. The months ahead bring a season for mending relationships, for showing our thankfulness for the presence of family and friends, for our fellow congregants, and for welcoming all people to come and join us in our waiting for God’s hand to act. And as we wait, we prepare our hearts to celebrate the birth of the Christ-child, God incarnate.

The time has come within the Church to *build up* one another. We enter a time for *reaching out* and bringing in, a time of harvest where we celebrate our abundance by sharing God’s hope with everyone. There truly are no lines of separation except the ones we create ourselves. God makes no distinction – all God’s children are made one in Christ Jesus. We can embrace being one Community of Faith as we support one another. Part of our work is not just reaching out and bringing in the harvest, but letting die all that holds us back from becoming the Church as Christ envisions it to be. Our work of sowing seed can then begin in earnest.

It is time for us to grow as disciples together. While we enjoy the beauty of the season, of our blessedness, and live in the promises of God, we cannot forget to reach out to those who find joy difficult in the coming celebratory seasons, those who live with loss or grief. It is time to become open and vulnerable with one another, as one does in their closest relationships, where trust is implicit and love and acceptance are always forthcoming.

We need to embrace the togetherness we are invited into when we are brought into the body of Christ. As with any *body*, when one member hurts, all are affected. In our society here in the United States, we have learned to put up walls of protection around our hearts, so that we might hide our pain. But pain can only be healed – whether physical, emotional, or spiritual – when we understand what causes that pain and work through it. And healing is faster, deeper, more complete, when it takes place in community, rather than in isolation with our pain. The whole body is in pain when one part is hurt, so the whole body should be part of the healing process.

Healing takes work. It requires action, not just waiting for time to pass. Just as crops will not grow if we do not plant seeds, there will be nothing to harvest and offer back to God if we do not tend to the growth of the body, and that includes healing and growth of each member of Christ's body. I will not speak of growth in terms of numbers alone, as is the tendency in our world today. Healing of past and current hurts will allow us to grow and prosper in the eyes of God. But growth within each of us (or our *discipleship*), as well as growing in togetherness and learning to use all God's blessings in cooperation within the body – these I will speak of. These are all necessary steps toward building a healthy body, a healthy Church: one that is ready to go out into the world, ready to be sent out into the harvest.

As you may have noticed, I have been torn today between two related ideas – healing and growth, much as I have been torn between two focuses: upon our support of one another and our outreach as the body of Christ. And yet, these truly are of a piece. Growth is stunted – or unhealthy like cancer – if we individually or as a church are suffering in body, mind, or spirit...for we are all linked. We rise or fall together; we live or die together. It all hinges on showing our love to one another AND on each of us being open to accepting the love of our brothers and sisters. That is the way of relationships, and the Church IS the relationship of all believers. Good relationships need be both healthy and growing, not stagnant.

Galatians 6 teaches that we will reap whatever we sow. If we sow hope and work toward unity, toward supporting each other through every hardship and loss in life, then that hope and work will bear fruit. That is to say, if we work toward growth within the body of Christ, then God will bless our work and we will harvest abundantly, both in our individual lives and as a church body. But if our goal is mere survival as a church instead of *thriving in Christ*, our sisters and brothers will be left alone in their pain, and we will surely dwindle in overall numbers and die, as so many small churches have in recent times.

And no matter how old we are nor how long we have followed Christ, we still need to grow in discipleship and to sow seeds of faith within our lives. We never reach an age where we ourselves cannot grow nor help others to grow in their Christlikeness. Whether young or old, no matter our circumstances, we are told in **2 Corinthians** that ***"The one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully."*** While you still draw breath and life is within you, you can sow seeds of faith and help others heal and grow. God is able to

provide what you need – whether it be the words to share the Gospel, the energy to reach out to another in their need, willingness to sit with another in their grief, or even the humility to accept help from others as they learn discipleship by reaching out to serve you in Christian love. At all times, God will supply what you need in the moment you need it as you grow in discipleship. Our bountiful Creator will multiply the seed you sow and increase the harvest of your righteousness. This passage from 2 Corinthians promises that when we act with generous hearts toward one another, we will be enriched in every way.

This week we have celebrated the lives of two members of our community who were special to us and to the Raymond area. Today we celebrate the harvest, which reveals the heart of Christ's teaching in John 12:24 – that the harvest comes only AFTER a seed dies, after it is sown in the ground. Bob and Gene may no longer be with us...indeed we have lost many of our loved ones in the past couple of years. But not only do they *live on* in our memories, they live on in us – in the way their lives and their work have shaped *who we are* and who we will become, both as persons and as the body of Christ in this place. We know this to be true.

Perhaps you wonder how you can celebrate today, or how you will face the coming Thanksgiving, Advent, and Christmas seasons with joy in your hearts. Well, let me speak another truth to you about the life God has granted to each of us: Our lives are not ones of dichotomous choices and experiences. Most of the time, although our culture might tell you otherwise, life experience is usually not either/or...but instead is both/and. There are shades of gray, not just black and white. Actually, there is a multitude of colors between joy and sorrow, just as there is shadow between total darkness and the light we find in Christ.

Just as a glass is both half empty and half full at the same time, our reality is that there remains both *things to celebrate* and *things to mourn* in the moment. The key is to recognize this truth and allow oneself to experience joy even during times of mourning, knowing that to find joy in the moment is not in opposition to our sense of loss. Rather, to find joy is our celebration of the gift of life that we all have, our life that we share together in families and in this community, even a celebration of the life of those that have passed on and the ways we have grown from their love.

In life there is often much to celebrate alongside much to lament. The passage we began with from Ecclesiastes 3 contrasts the extreme ends of life experiences and acknowledges the need to allow time for both the times of joy and sorrow. This wisdom writing emphasizes that we should not neglect either, not seek to avoid unpleasant experiences and seek only joy nor refuse to live in hope during times of grief. That is not how we were made. We were created to grow, to thrive. Life springs from death, joy can accompany sorrow, and healing is a process made possible by accepting what was alongside our current reality. Through Christ we have hope. In Christ, healing of all hurts is made possible.

So let us live in that hope today as we celebrate and join in fellowship together. Let us reach out to one another, in love and thanksgiving for our presence in each other's lives. Let us grow in our discipleship that we may be prepared to be sent out into the world to reap the wheat of the Lord. And let us do all things through Christ, who IS *Lord of the Harvest*.

All praise be to God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

