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Reap What You Sow

2 Kings 5:1-14
Galatians 6:1-16

As I was reflecting on the reading for this week from Galatians, Paul's phrase "for you reap whatever you sow" stood out.

This is not new advice. We can also find this same metaphor used in the book of Job (Job 4:8), Proverbs (11:18, 22:8), Hosea (10:12), and in the letter to James (3:18), to name a few occurrences.

And, although I don't think Jesus ever uses the language of sowing and reaping in exactly this way, he certainly teaches this same lesson when admonishing us to "do to others as you would have them do to you." (Matthew 7:12, Luke 6:31)

I think this is clearly an important spiritual principle. We can see this in the little details of our lives as well... smile at a stranger and see if they smile back. And if we curse someone, don't we often get a curse in return?

Today, we might talk about karma or "what goes around, comes around." We often hear self-help gurus talk about the power of positive thinking or setting intentions in our lives.

And in psychology, someone with low self esteem, for example, might use affirmations to re-train their thought processes. Just like an adult telling a child over and over that they are bad will cause that child to believe it, reminding ourselves over and over that we are worthy,

loved children of God will over time help us internalize and believe that truth.

This is all the same principle. What we sow, what we put into our minds, what we put out into the world, whether it be positive energy or negative energy, will largely determine what we reap, what we get back from that energy.

But I think Paul is also calling us to something more. Paul is not only reminding us that we reap what we sow, but Paul is calling us to be different from the world. As Christians, we are called to be an alternative community.

This section of Galatians begins by talking about relationships – how to be in community.

- It tells us to reconcile with others in a spirit of gentleness, without judgment.
- We are asked to bear one another's burdens, to be humble and carry our own load, to give back.
- We are asked not only as individuals, but in community, in relationship with each other, to intentionally sow what will grow God's love in this world – to be a community of healing and restoration, of gentle spirit, in a world that is often unforgiving.

Let's look for a minute at the story of Naaman that we heard a little bit ago. Naaman is a general and an enemy of Israel, but he also has leprosy. A slave girl tells him that there is a prophet in Israel that can heal him.

And, so with his leader's approval, Naaman goes to his enemy's king seeking healing. The king of Israel is suspicious at his motives because he knows that he can't heal Naaman.

But, Elisha steps in and, through a servant, gives Naaman a very simple instruction. In fact, it is so simple that

Naaman is angered, probably thinking “I came all this way to be told something so stupid as to bathe in the local river?” But, again, Naaman's servants convince him to do it, “what can it hurt?” And, so Naaman bathes and is healed.

What does Naaman sow in this story? For one thing, he is willing to listen. And he is willing to listen to people many would probably not listen to. Twice in this story, Naaman chooses to listen to his servants, people who are marginal in his society.

The slave girl at the beginning of the story sows hope and tells Naaman of someone who can heal him. Naaman could easily have dismissed her, this girl taken from his enemy is telling him to go to that enemy for healing... it doesn't seem too likely - but he chooses to listen.

Later in the story, Naaman is angered by what he seems to think is an absurd direction – that he'll be healed by bathing in the local river. And again, his servants set him on the right path by sowing calm and reason – hey, what would it hurt to do this simple thing? And Naaman chooses to listen.

Now, Naaman almost blows his chances in this story. Although he listens to the slave girl and goes to Israel for healing, he goes to the king instead of the prophet that the girl told him about. And the king is clueless. Luckily for Naaman, Elisha sows some good will of his own and steps forward, offering to help Naaman for God's glory.

And he proceeds to restore Naaman without judgment and with a gentleness in his instructions that one might not expect when dealing with an enemy. Note in this a potential parallel with Galatians and how Paul tells us to deal with conflicts with each other – restoration with a gentle spirit.

But Naaman almost takes a wrong turn a second time. He thinks Elisha's instruction is just a little on the silly side – a little too simple. But he listens to reason and bathes in the river as he was told.

Naaman is willing to not just listen, but to take action, to take a step forward, even if it isn't always quite right. A willingness to listen, and listen to unlikely advisors, and a willingness to act in right ways cause Naaman to reap good health.

It's also worth noting that Naaman is surrounded by people sowing good intentions on his behalf, without whom he may not have made it through to the healing: the slave girl who sowed hope and the other servants who sowed calm and reason.

So not only do we effect ourselves by the energy and intentions that we sow, but we are also affected by the energy and intentions of others.

And in his healing, Naaman learns a valuable lesson – that if we always look for the big and flashy solutions, we might miss a simple answer given directly to us.

This is another thing Naaman's story has in common with our reading from Galatians as Paul warns against acting just for show and boasting rights.

Naaman didn't need some complicated healing ritual that he could brag about later – the important thing is that he was healed, giving him a new lease on life.

So too Paul tells us the big showy stuff is not important, but we need to focus only on what is important - new life through Christ.

Paul advises us to always do what is right and never give up. To work for the good of all. To focus on the right

thing – following the way of Jesus. In other words, sow good seeds that we might reap the hope, joy, and love of God in our lives.

But Paul also uses some words that need an additional mention. First, in the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, Paul talks about sowing to the flesh bringing about corruption of the flesh.

But it is worth noting that the Greek word that Paul uses here for flesh means not only the physical body, but it also refers to human nature apart from divine influence. In fact, the Today's New International Version translates this word flesh as “sinful nature.”

And we can see this also earlier in Galatians when Paul lists the acts of the flesh and the majority of them such as jealousy and rage are not physical characteristics at all.

So it would be a mistake to think that Paul is talking about giving in to physical pleasures when he speaks of sowing to the flesh. Instead, Paul is warning us of living outside of the Spirit, warning us of living separated from God.

Living separated from God brings about corruption – turns our lives into something they are not meant to be. But, living in the Spirit, living in harmony with God's intention for us, brings about the qualities of eternal life – hope, joy, and love.

One other phrase that Paul uses is worth mentioning also. Paul says that the world has been crucified to him through the cross of Jesus. What exactly does he mean by this?

One might think that Paul is saying that the world doesn't matter, but that doesn't fit – Paul has just been telling us

to sow good in the world, to always be doing the right thing – to follow the way of Jesus.

And, that I think gets to what Paul is saying – not that the world doesn't matter to him, but that the way of the world, living for power and greed, is wrong – is dead to him – and that he has been recreated in the way of Jesus – the way of love.

So, in summary, what might we learn from our scripture readings today?

- Sow a willingness to listen, perhaps especially to people on the margins or people you wouldn't normally listen to.
- Sow a willingness to act, and don't ignore the simple steps – everything doesn't need to be big and showy – but focus on what is important.
- Reap what you sow – or sow good seed that you might reap the love of God in your life.

We might also take a moment to reflect on the practical applications in our own lives. I'm not going to say you have to do this thing or that thing, but I want to offer some questions that I think are worth giving thought to.

What is it we desire to reap in our lives?

What is it that we are sowing?

Where are we sowing it?

Is what we sow being nurtured in the Spirit?

It is worth reflecting on in our personal lives:

- in our every day actions what kind of energy are we putting into ourselves and into the world?
- What kind of TV do we watch or what kind of books do we read?
- Do we smile and say hello to strangers that we pass on the street?

This question of what we sow is also worth reflecting on in our community life:

- What kind of energy do we bring into our church community?
- Do we leave church depressed or feeling refreshed?
- What kind of energy does our church put out into the world?
- Do we as a community offer something positive to the world in an active way? How do we do that?
- Are we living up to Paul's expectations of the church as an alternative community?

And on this Independence Day I think it is worth reflecting on what we sow as a nation. I am very thankful that I was born in this country. We have many blessings as a nation and we should be thankful for them. We should be thankful for those that serve this country whether it be in the armed forces or in other ways.

But, the principle of sowing also applies:

- what are we sowing as a nation in the world and what do we expect to reap from that?
- Politically?
- Environmentally?
- We can probably think of many positive and negative answers to those questions...

I hope today, we can all take time to celebrate the positives and maybe reflect on what we can do about the negatives. I think we start with a willingness to listen and a willingness to act with the guidance of the Spirit – which also means prayer is another good place to start.

Whether it be nationally or in our church community or personally, we reap what we sow. So, plant yourself firmly in the garden of God, living in the guidance of the Holy Spirit, following the way of Jesus. And may you reap the hope, joy, and love of God in your life. Amen.