

# We Shall Come Rejoicing

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John Wilkinson  
November 15, 2015 (Stewardship Sunday)  
Luke 8:4-8, 11-15

Perhaps you associate the hymn “Bringing in the Sheaves” with your childhood. Or “Little House on the Prairie.” Or “The Beverly Hillbillies,” with Granny out by the cement pond. Perhaps you’ve never heard of “Bringing in the Sheaves,” let alone “Little House on the Prairie” or “The Beverly Hillbillies.” Perhaps, when you hear the words “bringing in the sheaves,” you think it’s laundry-related, “bringing in the sheets,” or, as a college friend, not a church person, once asked me, “Why do you sing about ‘bringing in the sheep? What if they don’t want to come in?’”

I don’t know the last time it’s been sung at Third Church, if ever, and I hope we won’t need a capital campaign after we sing it, because the walls will have tumbled down. Nonetheless, in this “Year of Sowing,” the themes are too fitting on a Stewardship Sunday to let this opportunity pass by. But let’s ease into it, with the first stanza and refrain only, and as we do, pay attention to the kinds of seeds we are called to sow, and what our harvest response might look like...

*Sowing in the morning, sowing seeds of kindness,  
Sowing in the noontide and the dewy eve;  
Waiting for the harvest, and the time of reaping,  
We shall come rejoicing, bringing in the sheaves.*

*Refrain:  
Bringing in the sheaves, bringing in the sheaves,  
We shall come rejoicing, bringing in the sheaves;  
Bringing in the sheaves, bringing in the sheaves,  
We shall come rejoicing, bringing in the sheaves.*

Today is Stewardship Sunday. In a moment, you will come forward and place your pledge cards in a basket, our somewhat obvious version of bringing in sheaves. We have made the case with lots of written material and five really wonderful Sunday morning presentations.

We Presbyterians don’t talk about money very well. We have done something new this morning, included in your bulletin a sheet with some facts and figures. The challenge is very real, as you can tell. What I hope you understand is how much EVERY pledge matters and EVERY dollar matters, and that your participation and generous response – however you self-define generous – matters.

In the universe of churches, Third Presbyterian Church is resource-rich. At the same time, as you know, we work very hard each year to make our budget work, to be prudent and frugal with every dollar that each of us gives, that we can compensate our wonderful staff, care for this beautiful and vintage building, nurture children and youth and adults, reach out in our community and beyond.

The truth is that we are a growing congregation with – it seems to me – strong momentum and good energy and a renewed call to make a difference within these walls and beyond them, morning, noontide and in the dewy eve. If there is the perception that this happens magically or behind-the-scenes, these figures will dispel that, I hope.

One story. In the Kenyan church, they receive an offering, passing pouches through the pews, like our offering plates. Then, they receive an additional offering to support the work of each of the parishes, the geographic divisions of the congregation. Lock boxes are uncovered and people come forward to make offerings according to where they live. We saw another thing the first Sunday we were there. The focus was on health, and the congregation was providing screenings in the field outside the building. They received an offering for that ministry. Somehow – and I didn't see how this all happened – they counted the offering and determined it wasn't sufficient. So they took another offering. We had to dig deep, *twice*. I'm not saying; I'm just saying.

*Sowing in the sunshine, sowing in the shadows,  
Fearing neither clouds nor winter's chilling breeze;  
By and by the harvest, and the labor ended,  
We shall come rejoicing, bringing in the sheaves.*

If you Google the words “seed” and “stewardship,” you will realize two things. One, that there is something slightly peculiar about someone who does that, and two, that there is a new world out there called, in fact, “seed stewardship.” Seed stewards are a committed and passionate bunch, I have learned. They are concerned, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century world of agribusiness, about preserving traditional strains of seeds, seed variety, seed diversity, seed resilience. One website talks about “preserving and sharing an abundance of seeds into the future,” which I loved. I loved it not because I am a seed expert, which I am not. I loved it because it connects that particular conversation with faith, and what we do this morning, and one of my favorite theological words, *abundance*.

Church can easily be about preserving what always has been, or even worse, about scarcity, how much we *don't* have. When that's the case, holding on to what has always been while focusing on our limitations, we will quickly die. Faith is not about hoarding, but investing. If we think about caring for faith in our season and then passing it on, less worried about its form than its fundamental substance, then we will have been good seed stewards, passing on faith's abundance, health, resilience, diversity, all taking root in the church, and growing.

There are many metaphors and lessons to be drawn from all of this, including all the forms these seeds might take – programs like worship and outreach and education and fellowship, or this building, or this staff – or values like love and hope and justice and mercy and reconciliation and grace. But what strikes me about seed stewardship is this, that seeds are not meant to be hoarded, but to be shared.

*Going forth with weeping, sowing for the Master,  
Though the loss sustained our spirit often grieves;  
When our weeping's over, He will bid us welcome,  
We shall come rejoicing, bringing in the sheaves.*

The iconic parable of the sower needs explanation, and thank God we get it. Seeds are planted – some get trampled on, some get eaten by birds, some die for lack of water, some grow in the thorns and are choked. And some flourish. Some thrive. All because they land on good soil. And we wonder. Are we the seed? Are we the soil? Yes. And no.

The seed, Jesus tells us, is the word of God. And we are, each of us, the various places where that seed lands. Sometimes we do not hear at all, and, Jesus says, woe to us. Sometimes we hear for a little while and then move on, because we have no roots. Sometimes we hear and there is growth, but then we are easily distracted and move on to other things. If I had to describe the cultural moment we are living in, with so much going on, things pulling us in many directions, short attention spans, it would be that one. But some, Jesus says, are like good soil. That, we pray, is us. We hold the seed in our hearts. We endeavor for good hearts, not because of who we are, but because of what the seed is. And when it grows, it sets out deep roots, so that it will not be choked or blown away. And when it grows, it bears fruit, because we have endured.

I do not think we need to parse the parable too precisely. Nor do I think we want to equate what we give with all of this too closely. Yet there is a relationship. Money is not faith. That we give, or how much, is not faith itself. But *that* we give, and how we stretch ourselves into self-defined generosity, is some kind of response, an indicator. And what happens here – worship, education for all ages, outreach with hungry people or city school kids or Kenyan partners, even compensating this staff or supporting this building – that is not faith itself, either. It is a vehicle by which and through which we live out our faith, a clear means, if not the only avenues, by which seeds like hope and peace and joy and grace and love can take deep root and bear glorious and beautiful and abundant fruit.

We are called to give; that much is clear. And giving is not a burden, but a gift itself, an opportunity. That much is clear as well. What is up to us is how that clear word lands, and what happens when it does.

This hymn we sang, which we may or may not sing again for a very long time, reminds us of many things. Faith is a holistic endeavor, and not to be compartmentalized. Bad things will

happen in our lives, as well as good ones. Faith is not an inoculation, nor a panacea. It is a promise. And it is a gift.

Kathleen Norris tells the story of a desert monk who was having trouble with his faith, so he went to his superior. The superior took a piece of dry wood. He planted it, and said to him, "Water it every day with a bottle of water, until it bears fruit." (*The Cloister Walk*)

Bearing fruit is the point of all this, what we do here, what we all do when you we gather here and depart into the world. Bearing fruit.

Perhaps you read about a poll this week that while our culture still believes, it is practicing its faith less and less. And that may be. But what I also believe, and perhaps in a horrible week like this filled with unspeakable violence and racial tension, believe as much as I've ever believed, is that this fruit is needed, and we are the soil on which this seed falls. That is why, in the face of everything that could indicate otherwise, we are, by the grace of God, seed stewards.

*Bringing in the sheaves, bringing in the sheaves,  
We shall come rejoicing, bringing in the sheaves;  
Bringing in the sheaves, bringing in the sheaves,  
We shall come rejoicing, bringing in the sheaves.*

Amen.