

Stewarding Bounty

Joel 3:13-16

Mark 4:26-29

Kalyn was so strong that despite tearing a muscle in her throwing shoulder at the start of the season, and giving up an average of more than forty pounds to each of her competitors, she won the shot put at the 2006 Michigan high school state track meet. She was named runner-up Miss Basketball that same year. She played basketball at the University of Michigan. On a dare from her roommate, a player on the women's nationally ranked softball team, she went to practice and after two days the coach offered her a partial scholarship. "Well, thanks," she said, "but I already have a whole one." These days Kalyn works as a physical therapist specializing in female athletes. She also volunteers with an international organization that tries to reunite freed sex-trade hostages with their parents.

Ann attended an elite private school in Indianapolis and graduated with honors from Northwestern. She married a doctor, they had a family, and she embarked on what she calls the "cliched life of a society volunteer." But her work has a unique focus. She specializes in caring for aging women. She drives them to stores and doctor appointments. She helps them organize and downsize. She uses her considerable intelligence and compassion to advise them as they face medical, family and financial decisions. When one of her ladies moves into a comprehensive care facility or dies, she finds another to help.

What do these two different women have in common? They use their gifts to make concrete differences in the real lives of others. They know what they do well and they do it to bless people. They have passions—deeply held interests—and they serve in ways that fit those passions. By so doing, they advance the Kingdom of God, whether they are conscious of it or not. They steward their gifts. Our passages today tell us God's purposes will work themselves out in history whether we see them in operation or not. We do not plant the seeds. We do not make them grow. Yet God has given us the job of “harvesting” them. We are to use the gifts God gives us to minister in Christ's name. Steward your gifts.

The first sixty-four verses of the Book of the Prophet Joel set the table for our verses, which contain the point of the whole prophecy. Israel has recently experienced a plague of locusts. The Spirit of the Lord leads Joel to see this as an allegory of the coming Day of the Lord, when God's righteous anger would flow over the land like lava. That anger would take the form of the armies of a pagan invader. The Israelites can do nothing to stop this, for the Lord has ordained it as punishment for their sins. They must repent and ask God's forgiveness. And at this point in the narrative Joel's vision takes a turn not commonly seen in other biblical prophets. He prophesies that should the people and their priests return to the Lord the Lord would turn to them. The next time foreign nations attacked, the Lord would judge them, not the Israelites.

Most Old Testament prophets believed the children of Israel must endure punishment before they could hope to re-enter the Lord's good graces. Not so Joel.

This is the meaning of the otherwise cryptic Joel 3:13. “Put in the sickle...Go in, tread...The vats overflow, for *their* wickedness is great.” Whose wickedness? Those foreign nations sending those armies, that's whose. Joel foresees them getting packed into a certain “valley of decision”. On the Day of the Lord, Joel implies, the Lord will destroy them there. As for his own people, Joel says, “But the Lord is a refuge to his people, a stronghold to the people of Israel.” God has mysterious, complicated purposes which *will* achieve fulfillment. In one of the greater of those mysteries, God freely chose to enter into a covenant with an obscure nation, Israel, and ultimately to use it as the springboard for his purpose of redeeming all who enter into a relationship with himself in the person of Jesus of Nazareth.

Do you follow all this so far? The growth of God's Kingdom, the working out of God's purposes in history, transcends our understanding. Yet we can see glimpses of it happening and we can even play our part in making it so. This is the point of Jesus' brief parable of the seeds growing secretly. Here he compares the Kingdom of God to seeds that grow and sprout, and the sower “knows not how.” Jesus means that the sower, who understands very well indeed that seeds need light and heat, good soil and moisture, does not understand how they grow. And in his day this was completely accurate. Humanity knew nothing of cells or photosynthesis. But once those plants matured, “at once he puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come.”

We do not understand how the kingdom of God grows, but God has appointed that we help with its harvest. Jesus clearly refers to Joel 3:16 with his conclusion

about the sickle and the harvest. At first glance his parable does not appear to reference the Day of Judgment. Or does it? What exactly is the harvest? Harvests come at the end of seasons. The harvest of the Kingdom must come at an ending point. Jesus does not overplay this. He does not interpret whether this harvest will be followed by a regular winter, during which the land will rest in preparation for repeating the whole cycle again the next spring, or whether it is The End.

No, Jesus focuses here on the growing, coming Kingdom. Mark has placed the telling of this parable in the middle of a list of parables about that same Kingdom. Each of them contains an admonition. Some warn us to keep vigilant so when the Kingdom finally comes in all its fullness we might be ready for it. Others caution us not to let the world distract us from our duty to do our part in bringing in that harvest. Jesus concludes this parable with the latter warning. Using a rhetorical method Bible scholars call the Prophetic Present Tense, he says, “But when the grain is ripe, at once he puts in the sickle, because the harvest is come.” The Prophetic Present Tense speaks of a future event as though it were happening right now. “But when the grain *is* ripe...” The harvest is *not* come, Jesus means, but when it does—and that may be right soon—be prepared to do your work.

Jesus also uses the phrase “at once”. In both the Aramaic he spoke and the Greek in which Mark wrote, that phrase conveys a sense of urgency that is difficult to express in English. Perhaps this will do the job: “But when the grain is ripe, with haste and passion and even fear, he puts in the sickle...” Sometimes we have to dig a little

to get the full import of a biblical text. This is one of those times. Jesus' mild, short little story actually contains an imperative, an order to his followers that they must jump to the work for which they have been gifted. We must steward our gifts. We must use our talents, interests and passions to assist in bringing in his Kingdom.

In addition to harvest, we have reached stewardship season. Today, I urge you to steward your gifts. As I reflect on over 36 years of preaching—delivering in excess, I reckon, of 1,500 sermons—I doubt I have preached more often on any other topic. If that's true it makes me a happy pastor. Because I honestly believe God gifted me to become a preacher. I do not mean to boast. I believe God gifts *all* people to do something that helps bring in the Kingdom. I feel blessed to have identified my gifts and to have found a way to use them that fits God's plan. My passion is that each person hearing this would discern their own gifts *and use them*.

We need not complicate this process. It has just the two steps: discernment and execution. You may not have taken either step. More likely, you have tried to serve God in some way without having taken the first step of discernment. Every church has folks in it who have been recruited to fill a committee slot, maybe even to become an elder or deacon, without real thought given to whether they fit there. Every church also has a number of burned-out folks whose desire to serve has evaporated. Do not neglect the first step of discernment. Pray to understand your gifts. Think about them. Perhaps the most effective way to discern your gifts is to ask a trusted, wise brother or sister in the church what they see in you.

Then once you have a sense of your gifts, look around to see where and how to use them. This may require resigning from another work you're already doing. It may require creating a job the church does not currently do. Or you may find that same blessing I discovered in finding the square hole for my square peg. This is the truest, most comprehensive form of stewardship. And we have not said a word about money.

Steward your gifts. Do you just love children? Do you wish you could help them develop their faith in Christ? When we resume the ministries of Sunday school and Parents' Night Out, volunteer for that work. Does driving through certain Terre Haute neighborhoods just break your heart? Get involved in a food pantry or join a group trying to get ahead of poverty, addiction and all the rest of it. Again, this congregation is exploring ways to attempt that with our new Matthew 25 initiative. That could fit you. Do you have a good head for figures? Join the Finance Commission. Do you love serving good food to appreciative people? Volunteer with the Christian Life Commission. The list of possibilities goes on.

Discern your gifts. Use them. Steward your gifts.