

Title: Therefore

Sermon text: 1 Corinthians 15:35-58

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Central Claim: Because God raised Christ, no labor offered is finally wasted even when it disappears into the ground before we see what God makes of it.

Therefore. That's an odd word to begin a sermon with, isn't it? Somebody once told me that whenever you come across the word *therefore*, you ought to stop and ask: "What is the *therefore* there for?" I don't know if that's good grammar. But it might be pretty good theology....

There is something about driving through and around the Mississippi Delta during planting season. Mile after mile, row after row, long straight lines disappearing toward the horizon. And somewhere out there, a dust cloud reveals a farmer putting perfectly good seed into the ground.

A farmer planting always seemed a little strange to me. She takes something that contains life and buries it. The hand opens. The seed falls. The earth closes over it. If we didn't know anything about farming, we might follow behind the tractor, digging everything back up. **"Sir... I think you dropped this."**

But the farmer trusts something. Once that seed leaves her hand, something has been relinquished. For a while, we do not see much. The dirt looks like dirt with no green shoot, stalk, or anything leading to a harvest. Just tilled-up dirt. Yet the farmer still plants.

Paul knew something about planting. Early in First Corinthians, he writes, "I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth." And Corinth does not look like a promising field. They are divided over their favorite preachers. They take one another to court. Some eat well at the Lord's Table while others go hungry.

And Paul begins his letter to these people: "To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints..." Sanctified? These people? Paul, have you met them? But Paul does not wait for them to get their act together. Before they have done anything, God has. God has called them, gathered them into one room mess and all.

So, Paul keeps working the field. Some at Corinth came to the Lord's Table with plates full, reclining at ease. Others arrived straight from a hard day's work with empty hands.... So Paul tells them, "What do you have that you did not receive?" These hands? The bread on your plate?

And when they rank their spiritual gifts, the way they ranked their seats at the table, Paul says that a hand cannot say to a foot, "I don't need you"; even the members who seem weaker are indispensable. God arranged the members of the body, each one, as God chose....

And then we come to chapter 15 — resurrection. At first, it sounds like Paul has changed subjects. Fourteen chapters on division and freedom and bodies and love, and now this?

But listen: "I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received. That Christ died for our sins... that he was buried... and that he was raised on the third day." Paul stakes everything on this. If Christ has not been raised, he says, our preaching is empty. Our faith is empty. Every prayer. Every hymn. Every child taught "Jesus Loves Me." Every meal served, every hand that is held beside a hospital bed. If Christ has not been raised, why bother?

But Christ has been raised.

And Paul reaches for the image of a seed again. “What you sow does not come to life unless it dies.” There is that farmer. Only now I wonder if we noticed what she was really doing. **Not simply planting. Letting go.**

Death is harder than talking about harvest. We like holding the seed. We like knowing where it is. But you cannot plant with a closed hand!!! “What you sow does not come to life unless it dies.”

“What you sow, you do not sow the body that is to be, but a bare seed... But God gives it a body as God has chosen.” The farmer opens a hand. The seed disappears. God gives.

“For this perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality.” These hands. The ones that planted the seed. The ones that served meals, that held babies at the font, that held the hands of the dying. And Paul says, “Death has been swallowed up in victory. Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?”

Paul isn't pretending death doesn't hurt. He knows better. So do we. We have stood beside graves. We've opened our hands and let go of people we would have given almost anything to keep. **(Pause)** Sometimes all you can see is dirt.

No green yet. No proof. If we knelt down in the dirt right now and dug with our hands, we would not find anything to show for it. (Long Pause) Sometimes we open our hands in trust. Sometimes death pries them open despite all our pleading. Sometimes all we see is dirt.

I do not want that to stay an abstraction. Let me show what it looks like in a life. I once knew a woman named Nell Douglas. She was a member of a church I served in Columbia, Maryland. Nell wasn't famous. She didn't write books or preach sermons. I doubt many people outside that congregation ever knew her name.

But almost every Friday for twenty years, Nell came to the church. She watered the plants. She cleaned the kitchen. She folded the bulletins. Then she went home. And the next Friday, she came back. Twenty years. **(Pause)** I wonder how many bulletins you can fold in twenty years. I wonder how many people noticed. Nell planted a lot of Fridays....

Hands opening. Seeds disappearing. So much of it is buried where we cannot see what becomes of it.

Nell got sick. Near the end, I went to see her in the hospital.... Her hands, the ones that watered plants and folded a thousand bulletins, lay still on the blanket now, thin and spotted. I held one of them as we read Scripture. We sang a couple of hymns, and a nurse passing in the hallway heard us and stepped into the room to sing with us, right there in her scrubs and not embarrassed at all. Nell's grip was weak, but she held on through the whole song. There would be no more plants to water, no more bulletins to fold, and no more kitchens to clean. Those hands had spent a lifetime doing the quiet work of love. (Long Pause) But they did not let go yet.

. Paul reminds us, “What you sow does not come to life unless it dies.” **(Long pause)** “God gives it a body as God has chosen.” **Nell's labor was not lost. But the gospel promises something more than that. Nell was not lost either.**

Teaching when you are tired. Caring when nobody notices. Loving when love requires you to open your hand. Paul calls it *Kopos* – labor that costs you something, work that leave something of us in the field. Not the tidy kind. The kind that leaves something of you in the field.

But Paul says, “Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.” God gave the growth. God gives the body. God gives the victory, too. (Long Pause) Therefore.

Paul never promises the work of the Lord won't tire us out, or that we'll see what grows from everything we plant. He says something better: it isn't empty. It isn't a waste. Because the harvest never finally depended on Nell. It didn't depend on Paul or Apollos. And it doesn't depend on us. “I planted. Apollos watered. But God gave the growth.”

Not because everything works out as we planned. He says it NOT because nothing dies. The seed disappears. The body dies. The hand opens. And still, God gives. **(Pause)** The seed does not raise itself. God does.

What do you have that you did not receive? These hands. The ones that will set the table after this service. The ones that will reach for a phone to check on someone tomorrow. The ones that will, one day, be still. **All received. All held for a while. And eventually the hand opens.**
(Long pause)

Someone this week will teach a child, make a meal, sit beside a hospital bed, or forgive. We may plant something in the soil of God's future, and we may never see what grows from it. **(Pause)**
Plant it anyway. Open our hand. **(Long pause)**

Nell's hands folded a lot of bulletins. Eventually, hers opened too. But Nell was not discarded, and Nell was not lost. The God who raised Jesus received her, and God will give what only God can give. “Therefore, my beloved, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord, your labor... is not in vain.”

Prayer of Illumination

Gracious God, you give life to the seed hidden in the earth, and you raised Jesus Christ from the grave. Open our ears to hear your Word, open our hearts to receive it, and open our hands for the work of love. By your Holy Spirit, plant your truth within us, give it growth, and make us steadfast in hope that nothing done in the Lord is ever in vain. Through Jesus Christ, our risen Lord. Amen.

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But someone will ask, “How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?” Fool! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. And as for what you sow, you do not sow the body that is to be but a bare seed, perhaps of wheat or of some other grain. But God gives it a body as he has chosen and to each kind of seed its own body. Not all flesh is alike, but there is one flesh for humans, another for animals, another for birds, and another for fish. There are both heavenly bodies and earthly bodies, but the glory of the heavenly is one thing, and that of the earthly is another. There is one glory of the sun and another glory of the moon and another glory of the stars; indeed, (a – emphasis mine) star differs from (a – emphasis mine) star in glory.

So, it is with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable; what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonor; it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness; it is raised in power. It is sown a physical body; it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a physical body, there is also a spiritual body. Thus, it is written, “The first man, Adam, became a living being”; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit. But it is not the spiritual that is first but the physical and then the spiritual. The first man was from the earth, made of dust; the second man is from heaven. As one of dust, so are those who are of the dust, and as one of heaven, so are those who are of heaven. Just as we have borne the image of the one of dust, we will also bear the image of the one of heaven.

What I am saying, brothers and sisters, is this: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. Look, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For this perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality. When this perishable body puts on imperishability, and this mortal body puts on immortality, then the saying that is written will be fulfilled:

“Death has been swallowed up in victory.”

“Where, O death, is your victory?

Where, O death, is your sting?”

The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Therefore, my beloved brothers and sisters, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord because you know that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.