

Lection: Philippians 2:1-13

Rev. Ron Patterson

This morning, as you heard, we begin our annual Stewardship campaign. This is when we are asked to support our congregation with our dollars and our dedication. I hope you know that Jesus spent more time talking about money and how we use it than any other topic. I need to confess right up front that I used to begin stewardship sermons with an apology, not wanting to offend anyone by talking about money, because in my family and in my mind that was a forbidden topic, private, secret and off limits.

But Jesus rescued me with his honesty and some good congregations nurtured me with their generosity and dedication and helped me forget my fear. And while I will be speaking again on this topic in a couple of weeks with more specifics, I want to use my sermon time today to tell you a story.

My beloved always says that 'my little kid on the farm' stories are the best ones I tell, because unlike the other stories that help me make sense of life as a person of faith, the 'little kid on the farm' stories come from the time that molded how I look at the world as a child of God. The farm is gone, the people who touched my life then are gone, but the memories animate my day to day.

When I was seven, I was sent to my great-grandparents dairy farm in rural Ohio to stay and for the next ten years, I spent every summer and almost every school vacation on that farm working and experiencing the rhythms of nature and the life cycle of a working farm with hogs and sheep and chickens and beef cattle and a raft of dairy cows and hay and corn and wheat and oats and gardens and canning and fields and woods and springs of cool clear water and endless chores and just plain hard work. That experience, more than school or college or seminary molded that place on the inside of my heart that I would describe as my soul.

Today, I want to tell you the story of the miraculous peach tree. But to share this story, I need to give you a little farming background. When we made hay on the farm, the hay would be cut and then when it was dry, it would be raked together into windrows so that the hay bailer could pick it up and pack it into bails. This process normally took about three days and as a little kid, since I couldn't drive the tractor yet, I didn't have much to do with it, other than helping collect and stack the bails and bring them into the barn. But sometimes, just when the hay was about dry, there would come a sudden thunder storm and you just can't bail wet hay--and then would come a chore which I hated more than any other.

It involved picking up a three tine hayfork and fluffing up the windrows of hay just enough to permit the breeze to blow in under the hay to dry it so that by afternoon it could be bailed. And I hated that job, because it was hot and it was dusty and it was in the sticky humid sun of an Ohio summer. And once in a while a snake or rabbit or a mouse would be hiding under the hay and as you walked along fluffing the hay they would jump out and for a little kid that was terrifying. And the job was endless in a way that things are often endless for a child.

One summer on a miserable hot day I was alone doing this job way out around the hill from the barn, fluffing the windrow with my hayfork when I came to the end of the field. I was so hot and feeling totally sorry for myself and suddenly I looked up and there was a tiny tree growing in the fencerow that divided our farm from the neighbor's woods. And as I looked, I noticed that something was growing on the tree.

The tree was loaded with gigantic peaches--the size of small grapefruit, and they were ripe and they were wonderful and I ate a couple and each time I finished fluffing a windrow I stopped and ate another peach and I forgot about the heat and the snakes and the sun. That little tree became my best friend that afternoon and to this day they were the best peaches I have ever tasted.

The next summer, when it came time to work that field again, I looked for that peach tree—and the first time that summer I managed to make it to the end of that field, I was cutting thistles along the edge of the field where corn was now growing. I looked and looked for the peach tree and finally found the same place and there it was—only that year, it was just a nearly dead stump of a thing—uncared for and unplanned, it had pretty much died over the winter. There were no more peaches. It was gone.

And I have thought about that peach tree many times since. Every time I've tasted a good peach and you have great peaches here in Ft. Collins, I've wondered about that peach tree. Where did it come from? How did it get there? Chances are one of my relatives—some cousin or great uncle, had passed that way eating a peach and tossed the peach pit into the fence row. Chances are, by some miracle that peach pit grew—and by another miracle, uncared for and unbidden—that little peach tree had managed to bloom and prosper for a few years, half a mile from no where in the back of the beyond.

And while those peaches were the sweetest ones in the world—something was missing--something important was missing. There was no planning and there was no ongoing care or giving to nurture that little tree and so when the harsh wind blew across those Ohio hills that next winter, the little tree stunted eventually died.

So often in the life of the churches I have known over the years, I have seen the same thing happen to great ideas and even great congregations that did not take to heart the call of Jesus to give and to care. Too often there was this assumption that someone else would do it, or that an individual's giving did not make a difference. Growth and leaders and mission and our work in this community depend on our enthusiasm and our financial support.

And so I am a believer. I believe in planting trees I will never live to enjoy. I believe in doing what I can to make the dream others gave me come true in a future that will not include my presence. I believe in giving that supports people as they do the love of Jesus in this community and around the world. I believe in giving to maintain this building so that my grandchildren will find the same love I experienced in my home church as a child. I believe in a music and youth program that exists to proclaim God's love with verve and excellence. I believe in giving to support the cause of peace and justice. I believe that the more we give, the deeper our experience of God's presence will be.

I wandered in here six weeks ago and what I discovered was a living outpost of the Jesus movement named Plymouth: people working together and loving, thinking and living, people daring and dreaming. The gifts we share and the commitment we make will strengthen this congregation and this community. The lives we live and our giving makes that possible today and for the sake of the future. I thank God for your witness and for the ministry we share. Amen.