

Sermon: "Can you force seed to grow?"

Date: August 22, 2021

Scriptures: 1 Corinthians 3:5-9; Psalm 126

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We have been working through Bishop Scott Jones' book "The Evangelistic Love of God & Neighbor" for the past few weeks as a church. On YouTube, through Zoom, and in worship we have been looking at idea raised by Bishop Jones on the intersection of love and evangelism. Evangelism is the act of sharing the evangel (or Good News), but as many of us have realized while reading, evangelism is more than the act of simply sharing a good word.

Among other things, evangelism is the way in which we invite people to live as disciples of Jesus Christ. Evangelism is the doorway through which the transforming love of God is shared with others. Evangelism is a deeply personal act in which a genuine love for the person precedes any invitation. Evangelism is an act of expressing God's radical love for people of all walks of life. In many ways, watching Bishop Jones try to define evangelism reminds me of the ancient mythological story of Hercules battling the hydra. Like Hercules, it seems that every definition of evangelism which Bishop Jones describes leads to an additional two definitions of evangelism!

If you are reading along with us, this was the last week of the more intellectual side of our study. From here, we begin to look at the practical ways that evangelism is a part of our mission. We are going to jump forward a bit during our sermon to look at a very practical concept that Bishop Jones presented this week. On page 104, Bishop Jones writes:

“If an evangelist does everything right to the best of his or her abilities, is it certain that the person being evangelized will respond positively? Of course not. The recipient may prefer darkness to light and choose not to serve God (John 3:20). The recipient may not fully understand the message. The recipient may not be ready to make a commitment, but may need more time to decide whether this invitation is the correct way of life. Cultural and social factors may interfere. The idea that excellent performance of the ministry of evangelism guarantees positive responses places too much emphasis on the agency of the evangelist. Excellence on the part of the evangelist and faithfulness on the part of God do not mean that others will cooperate.”

There's a lot to unpack there, but I would repeat that last line: “Excellence on the part of the evangelist and faithfulness on the part of God do not mean that others will cooperate.” In other words, we can do everything right, God can remain faithful, and things may still not work out like we would prefer.

A few years ago, I was invited to visit with a family to talk to a visiting child. The grown up child had been living across the country and was living a very dangerous lifestyle. All of the local family was gathering for an intervention and I was invited to talk with this person about what had been going on in their life. I came, I listened, I prayed, and I shared the good news to the best of my ability. It was clear that there was a need and everyone waited for God to act in this life.

A few months later, I sat with the family and heard about how things had not changed. What had the family done wrong? What had the minister done wrong? Where was God? Those are tough questions, but not new questions. How many times had I had the same

conversation with grandparents who prayed for their grandchildren, with spouses praying for their partners, and with committees that were certain if they did x, y, or z that people would flood into the church? Didn't we do everything that we could, Pastor? Did we forget something?

In truth, Bishop Jones nails home an important truth like a carpenter drives home a nail. Sometimes people are faithful, God is faithful, and people do not cooperate with the best of our plans. It is true that some people reject the light, but it is also true that sometimes the moment is not right. Sometimes people have cultural issues keeping them from accepting the good news and sometimes people just need a little more time to process things. Regardless of the reason, sometimes we can be completely faithful and things still will not work out as we would prefer.

In our psalm, we have an indication that this is not a new phenomenon. Psalm 126 begins simply:

- ¹ When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion,
we were like those who dream.
- ² Then our mouth was filled with laughter,
and our tongue with shouts of joy;
then it was said among the nations,
“The Lord has done great things for them.”
- ³ The Lord has done great things for us,
and we rejoiced.

Think about the words used in this psalm. As the psalm begins all of the words are in the past tense: “we were like those who dream,” “then our mouth was filled with laughter,” and “it was said.” The phrasing is

all set in the past tense: this moment the psalmist is remembering occurred in the past.

As the psalm ends, the tense changes. There is one verse in the present tense and then the entire psalm looks to the future. The psalm continues:

⁴ Restore our fortunes, O Lord,
like the watercourses in the Negeb.

⁵ May those who sow in tears
reap with shouts of joy.

⁶ Those who go out weeping,
bearing the seed for sowing,
shall come home with shouts of joy,
carrying their sheaves.

Think about the shifts of this psalm. The psalm begins by remembering the blessing of God in the past, concludes with a hope for the future that is marked with joy despite the fact that they head out in sorrow and tears. The one phrase in the present tense is a request: “Restore our fortunes, O Lord, like the watercourses in the Negeb.”

The psalmist knows that the past was blessed, dreams of a future that is blessed, and is honest about the fortunes of the people in that moment. Things are troubled, things are difficult, and the psalmist needs help.

Now let me ask you a question: who was unfaithful in the present moment for this psalmist? Was the psalmist unfaithful? Do we know that for a fact? Was God unfaithful? If so, why does the psalmist still trust that God will hear this prayer? While the scriptures as a whole

describe the rise and fall of the people of God in God's favor, is this psalm a story of one moment?

What if the psalmist did everything right, God was faithful, and things still did not cooperate? What if things are not always simple? One of the reasons the psalms are some of the bedrock scriptures for many people is that the psalms have a way of speaking into our present regardless of what is going on in our lives. As strange as it seems, these ancient songs and prayers have continued to be relevant to people for thousands of years. There is something timeless about what they share with us.

Sometimes we can do our very best to present the good news to people we love, hope for the best in years to come, and still have to live into that moment from the psalms. Sometimes we must do our best to be faithful and trust that God will work in this life even when we do not see things working out the way we wished. Sometimes we pray and the prayer seems unanswered. Sometimes we want the very best for someone and they still choose to say "no." It can be difficult to hear, but sometimes sharing the good news faithfully does not end the way we would prefer.

If we were farmers, we might understand this truth easily. You can plant a seed over and over, but you cannot force it to grow. I have this long obsession with trying to grow an herb known as lovage. In Europe it was incredibly popular for a long time and has a celery like flavor. I fell in love with this herb reading about it in cook books and found that my neighbor grew it successfully in the yard next to the last parsonage where I lived.

I am telling you, I am currently on season five of trying to grow this ridiculous herb. Am I succeeding? No. The plant will not grow. I have

tried multiple seeds in different years, tried growing cuttings, and even transplanted a baby plant. All of them died. One of them is currently dying in a planter outside the parsonage here. No matter how hard I plant those seeds, no matter how patient I am, the plant will not grow for me!

Our reading from 1 Corinthians 3:5-9 shares a simple truth about the gospel that compares it to a seed. Paul writes:

⁵What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you came to believe, as the Lord assigned to each. ⁶I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. ⁷So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. ⁸The one who plants and the one who waters have a common purpose, and each will receive wages according to the labor of each. ⁹For we are God's servants, working together; you are God's field, God's building.

When Paul brought the gospel to Corinth, he left behind the gift of the good news to grow in the people's lives. Apollos, another preacher, came to share with the people and helped the newly growing Christians to develop. As Paul writes, the community is in the midst of a drawn out argument: who deserves the credit?

One planted, one watered, but God grows the plant. This message sums up how Paul feels the process works. You can present the good news until you are blue in the face, you can encourage and pray for others continually, but in the end, it is God alone who gives the growth. In other words, we can do our best to share the good news, we can water what growth we see, but ultimately we cannot force people to believe or even force the faith of others to grow. Growth belongs to God alone.

So, how do we respond when we do our best and nothing happens? I believe that we pray for the best, understand that we may not understand everything, and trust that God will be present in those moments. It can be difficult to let go, but sometimes we need to let God work. We cannot force the good news into someone's heart any more than we can force a plant to grow.

Ultimately, part of the good news that we preach is a faith that God is both loving and able to work in our lives. It is my belief that God works in every life, even if it is sometimes hard to see. The Jesus I knew did not force people into faith, dismiss their fears, or even criticize those who could not believe. When Jesus faced a rich young man who had trouble believing, his statement of astonishment always struck me as being both loving and compassionate: In Luke 18:24-25, Jesus says: “²⁴ Jesus looked at him and said, ‘How hard it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God! ²⁵ Indeed, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.’ ”

It is hard for people to believe at times and in some moments it can seem like all is hopeless, but God can work. The next few verses in Luke put it well:

²⁶ Those who heard it said, “Then who can be saved?” ²⁷ He replied, “What is impossible for mortals is possible for God.”

²⁸ Then Peter said, “Look, we have left our homes and followed you.” ²⁹ And he said to them, “Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or wife or brothers or parents or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God, ³⁰ who will not get back very much more in this age, and in the age to come eternal life.”

Friends, the work of the gospel was always out of our hands. What God has done in our lives is impossible for us to do ourselves. God has always been the one working in us and through us, so I invite you to have faith. If you have planted the good news to the best of your ability, if you have watered to the best of your ability, if you have prayed to the best of your ability, then things are in God's hands. What is impossible for us is possible for God. I invite you to trust that God can use what you do with your life and to let those situations and persons rest in the hands of God.

Let us pray...