

Lessons From Down on the Farm by Rev. Cathy Russell

Based on Matthew 13: 1-9, 18-23

July 10, 2011

farmers still

at the kitchen table

we cup our hands around coffee mugs

to fight off the chill of fall rains

we talk about late harvest and sprouting swaths

and the whims of marketing boards money-lenders

and mother nature

we remember past years with bumper crops

and how the north-east quarter always produces

but this year the swaths are under water

and tough as things seem it's not so bad as Harrisons

after their auction last year they moved to the city

they say they used to lie awake wondering if the old boss cow

made it through the winter if the brockle-faced heifer

calved on her own

they drive out to check other people's crops

on land their grandfather homesteaded

stop in at coffee row talk about the weather

like they were still here

From Maverick Western Verse 1994, John C. Dofflemyer, ed. Gibbs Smith Publisher

(I searched for the author's name for this poem on the internet, but to no avail)

My first pastoral charge was in Northern Ontario, three small churches in three communities, each one smaller than the other. One of the most faithful families in that pastoral were dairy farmers the parents and two of their children and their families attended the church in town. The day I moved in, I was invited to supper by Alan, one of their sons. Alan is married to a wonderful woman named Joanne and they had at that time two lovely children- Faith who was two and Daniel who was four. In the course of conversation I asked if Daniel was attending Jr. Kindergarten, and his father answered "No, he's not actually. He comes to the barn with me every day, and he learns a lot more than he would in Jr. Kindergarten." I'm not one to malign the education system, but I'm sure that's true. There is so much to learn on a farm- all the tasks associated with milking and feeding and seeding and harvesting, and a hundred other jobs besides. But in addition to the practical skills associated with the work, farming has a lot of life skills to teach as well.

Farming is not a job, not a career- it is a way of life, a vocation, and I would even go so far as to say, a calling. Farmer's don't get a lot of respect or even much thought in our society these days, but in fact, all of us have something to learn from farmers and life on the farm, especially those who would be disciples of Jesus Christ.

Of course, farming was far more central to everyday life in Jesus' time. Common crops included some wheat, but more barley, grapes, olives, almonds, figs, cucumbers, chick peas, onions and spices. Even potters or metal workers would have a family field and perhaps some animals. Only the very rich were not directly engaged in food production, and even they kept a close eye on the fields and herds they owned and employed others to take care of. Farming was not just a way of life in Jesus' world, it *was* life. No wonder he drew upon the activities of field working- planting, tending and harvesting and upon shepherding for his parables of the kingdom of God.

Although for most of us, the connection to and ongoing awareness of farming has been greatly reduced, when we think about this parable, we discover that the character discipline and life of farming has much to teach those who want to be a part of God's kingdom on earth. The farm still has many lessons to teach us.

Farming draws upon knowledge, experience wisdom and intuition. It requires both an ability to deal with the present situation, and to plan for the future, both immediate and long-term. But in the end, no matter how much knowledge, experience, or intuition one has, no matter how well one plans, one of the first lessons farmer's learn is that there will be disappointments beyond their control. One year, the fields are turned to dust by drought, another year, they're under a foot of water. Then the crops are great, but your animals are exposed to a disease. Crop prices plummet or feed prices skyrocket; your most expensive piece of equipment breaks down, right after you took the risk of acquiring that new field. When you live a life in tune with the supposed "predictability" of the seasons you discover that the only thing you can predict is that unpredictable things will happen.

The endurance of farmers in the face of these unpredictable disappointments, the inner strength, the ability to accept hard times take a deep breath and move on is remarkable. And you know that when a farmer breaks-which is pretty unusual- it has been under a pressure that would have crushed most anyone else long ago. More often, as long as they are able, the farmer keeps getting out there to plant new seed year after year, come what may. Perhaps they are able to do this because they know that disappointments may come, will come, *are bound to come sometime*, and knowing that, accepting that, means that they are not overwhelmed when they do.

In Jesus' parable of the sower three quarters (let's take a bit of license and suppose that each part represents one quarter) of the sower's seed was lost- in the sense that it did not mature into harvestable grain. Some of it went to feed the birds, some of it was scorched in the sun,

some of it was choked by weeds. Only one quarter of it landed in fertile soil. *A full seventy five percent of the seed was lost!* Surely the sower didn't anticipate that! Surely there would be a considerable sense of disappointment- no?

So, Jesus begins his parable by saying the kingdom of God is like someone who went out to sow and lost 75 percent of the seed in the process! Yikes!

Well, perhaps the first lesson Jesus draws from the farm, is that one when we scatter the seeds of the gospel we should expect some disappointment. I'm not saying we should be fatalistic or pessimistic, but perhaps we should not expect that all the seed we sow is going to hit fertile soil, not every idea we have is going to work out the way we hoped, not every program we plan will catch on, not every sermon that is preached is going to set every heart on fire. We can get pretty fixated on success, as the measure of all things, and maybe Jesus is saying that's part of the problem. Our job is to sow the seeds God has given us with prayer, with energy, and hope. Our job is **not** to have a perfect rate of success, our job is **not** to blame each other or ourselves when the unpredictable or the unanticipated happens, our job is **not** to be afraid to try something different just because it might not work. We can always find a million reasons NOT to do something- it takes a lot more courage to just sow the seed and see what happens.

The first lesson Jesus draws from the farm is that sowing the seeds of God's kingdom is an unpredictable and uncontrollable business, even for those who have knowledge, experience and intuition, just as unpredictable and uncontrollable as sowing seeds in a field, and we really shouldn't expect anything different. After all, we are not in control- do we imagine that we are God? No, we just work for God.

My former ministry partner, the Rev. David Mundy told me he read about a church where every year they take a moment to recognise and even celebrate something they call "the best

idea that didn't work." which is exactly what it sounds like. A good idea, well executed, that for one reason or another didn't work out the way it was planned. Why would a church do this? Because they want to be a community where trying new things is encouraged, because they don't want *people* to feel like failures even when an idea may fail. They expect **and** accept that some seed will be lost, but they want to keep sowing.

What is it that keeps farmer's going, in the face of disappointments and let-downs? How and why do they continue their way of life when so many factors are out of their control? If farmer's have a higher resilience and realism than many of us, I suspect they must also have a higher degree of hope. Hope- not optimism, which is different. Anna Deveare Smith, actress and professor of performing arts at New York University has a really helpful definition of the difference between these two words.

Optimism [says] there is enough evidence out there that allows us to think that things are going to be better, [it's] much more rational, [and] deeply secular. Whereas hope looks at the evidence and says "it doesn't look good... it doesn't look good at all." Says "we gonna make a leap of faith...go beyond the evidence... create new possibilities based on visions that become contagious to allow us to engage in heroic actions always against the odds with no guarantee what so ever." That's hope. That's hope.

The second lesson from the farm Jesus draws is that you can't be a farmer without hope. The evidence is that 75 percent of the seed was lost birds, rocks, the sun and weeds. All the sower had was 25 percent of seed in good soil. All the evidence was that the harvest would be poor indeed, all the evidence was that his family might starve! So what does the sower have to get through till harvest time? Nothing but hope, a leap of faith that imagines a new possibility beyond the evidence of a three quarters loss. And what God did with that last twenty five percent surely exceeded the imagination of the sower. Mind, now the other 75 percent was not miraculously restored- two thirds of the seed that was scattered *was lost, it stayed lost*

and Jesus has nothing more to say about it. But the twenty five percent that fell in good soil, what that 25 percent produced abundantly, prolifically, almost miraculously.

The evidence is that the current church going generation is disappearing, our congregations are shrinking, we have less time, and our churches have less money. That's the evidence. Our job is not to argue with the evidence, or cry over the evidence or blame each other, or even God, over this evidence. Our job is to have hope- hope that imagines and prays for and works for new possibilities beyond the evidence, against the odds, with no guarantee whatsoever, only a trust in the God we know in Jesus Christ. Our job is to hope that at least a small percent of what we try with faith with prayer, will land in fertile soil, will take root, and far exceed our imaginings.

This fall we are going to start a visioning process called FOCIS here at St. Matthew's, and we hope that you will all be involved. Not because you think there's any guarantee of success, not because the evidence is encouraging, not because you feel optimistic, but because you are hopeful. Hopeful that God has still provided us with seeds of the gospel to sow, hopeful that we can scatter a new vision in our community, hopeful that some of that seed, maybe only a small percentage will find fertile soil, take root and grow into something that will exceed our imagination. Thanks be to God, AMEN.