



Harvest Time

John 4:35-36

November 20, 2005

This coming Thursday, both sides of our family will come to Wilson, from Norfolk and Edenton, from Raleigh and Winston-Salem, and we will gather at our home on Dewfield Drive and sit down at the table, and give thanks. Frankly, one thing I will be thankful for is that Thanksgiving is still the least commercialized holiday of the year. We don't give gifts at Thanksgiving, so the stores don't promote it much – they are too busy setting up for Christmas. So Thanksgiving is still a fairly simple time: time to eat, time to see family, time to go out in the woods and pretend to be hunting, or time to stay inside and watch football. And because Thanksgiving is still simple and un-commercialized, there is still time to do what Thanksgiving is for: give thanks.

In days gone by, Thanksgiving used to mark the end of harvest time. It used to be that when we sang, *Come, ye thankful people, come, Raise the song of harvest home! ...* we sang it having just come in from the fields, our hands still smelling of the sweet earth, our necks red from the autumn sun, our barns filled with produce and grain... *All is safely gathered in, Ere the winter storms begin...*

Wilson County is the fifth largest farming county in North Carolina, but few of us in this room are farmers, and only some of us are gardeners. We live with several degrees of separation between us and the land. We have to teach our children where their groceries come from. So what does it mean for us to raise to God “the song of harvest home?” Is there any kind of harvest that we 21st century suburbanites can bring to God? The next verse of the song tells us:

*We ourselves are God's own field,
Fruit unto His praise to yield;
Wheat and tares together sown,
Unto joy or sorrow grown;
First, the blade, and then the ear,
Then the full corn shall appear;
Lord of harvest, grant that we
Wholesome grain and pure may be.*

Here is the harvest we post-agricultural people can give. The harvest we bring to God is none other than ourselves. We are God's own field. We are the fruit unto His praise to yield. So Lord of harvest, grant that we may be a wholesome and pure harvest for you. Thanksgiving is harvest time in more ways than one.

IN FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH, THANKSGIVING IS A TIME TO BRING TO GOD A HARVEST FROM THE FRUITS OF OUR FINANCIAL GROWTH. As I said, few of us come home from the fields with wagons of produce. When we come in from the fields, we come in from various fields of work, the field of business, the field of finance, the field of law or medicine or education. Those are the fields we labor in day by day. And when we come home, we don't bring home a wagon of produce, we bring home a paycheck. That is our 21st century suburban harvest, an envelope that we take to the bank. Thanksgiving is a time to remember that even that comes from God. Our ability to earn a living is a gift from God. Tonight at the Loyalty Dinner, we will sing, "Come Ye Thankful People Come," and we will renew our commitment to return to God part of the earnings God give to us. That is one harvest we bring to the Lord, the harvest of the sweat of our brows and the work of our hands.

The Methodist leader John Wesley had a great attitude toward wealth and sharing that harvest with God. He used to say, "Make all you can, so you can save all you can, so you can give all you can." The Lord of the harvest gives us the strength and the intellect to make wealth. We honor the Lord when we are careful stewards of our money by saving all we can. And we honor the Lord when we are generous stewards of our savings by giving all we can. At the Loyalty Dinner tonight, and in the coming year of our giving Sunday to Sunday, we bring to the Lord a harvest of our financial wealth.

THERE IS A SECOND WAY WE BRING A THANKSGIVING HARVEST TO THE LORD: A HARVEST OF OUR SPIRITUAL GIFTS. This has been the theme of my messages to you this fall. I hope you know it by heart now:

- God has granted to us spiritual powers called spiritual gifts.
- Each and every one of us has been given at least one spiritual gift.
- This gift is some kind of power to serve God and serve people and build up God's kingdom on earth: such as teaching, evangelism, service, compassion – the possibilities of God's grace are infinite.
- This gift is not to build ourselves up, but to build others up.

In your worship folder is a green spiritual gifts survey. It is a simple survey that covers but a sample of the many spiritual gifts that God gives. But it can help you begin to discover what spiritual powers God has given you, and where God would have you put that gift to work. Tonight at the Loyalty Dinner, we will encourage you to be a steward of your spiritual powers as well as your financial powers. We will ask you to write down one of your gifts of the Spirit on a card and bring it to the Lord. That card will be your way to say, "Lord, you have given this special ability to me. Now I give it back to you for your service." I foresee tonight a very moving and meaningful harvest of spiritual gifts for the Lord.

So in thanksgiving we bring to the Lord a harvest of our wealth, and we bring a harvest of our spiritual gifts.

BUT THERE IS A THIRD WAY WE BRING A THANKSGIVING HARVEST TO THE LORD: A HARVEST OF SOULS.

Today we have witnessed the baptism of Daniel Wells. Daniel has known the love of Jesus every moment of his life. but today is special for him and his family, for today he has made a public offering of himself. Today Daniel has publicly brought himself as a Thanksgiving harvest to the Lord.

Jesus saw himself as a harvester of souls. Now like most of us, Jesus was not a farmer, but had another trade, in his case, carpentry. But throughout his ministry, Jesus had the feeling that he was farming and harvesting for God, like the day he met that woman at the well. In the heat of the noonday sun it was just Jesus and that woman at the well. There they spoke mind to mind and heart to heart about living water, about God and worship. This was the last woman you would expect to be religious, but by the well she confessed her belief and hope that the Messiah is coming. Jesus couldn't resist confiding in her, "I am he, the one who is speaking to you."

Just then the disciples walked up. When Jesus looked back toward the woman, she was gone, headed back to the village in such a hurry that she had left her water jar by the well. And then Jesus realized that this woman had been added to the Lord's harvest. It made Jesus so full of joy that he told his baffled disciples he had food to eat they knew not of. And if such an unlikely woman could be gathered into God's harvest, then surely the land must be full of other people who were ready too. So Jesus said,

Do you not say, 'Four months more, then comes the harvest'? But I tell you, look around you, and see how the fields are ripe for harvesting. The reaper is already receiving wages and is gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together.

As the King James puts Jesus' words, the land was "white unto harvest," full of people who were ready to submit to God's rule.

One of the joys of driving through Wilson County in November is driving by all the cotton fields white unto harvest. For example, as you go down the on ramp from Raleigh Road to 264 Bypass, look off to your right and there is a beautiful field of white cotton stretching out for acres and acres. Our county is white unto harvest in more ways than one. Wilson is full of people who are ready and eager to be gathered into God's kingdom if only someone would make the love of Jesus real to them. Phil Frady, who will speak to us tonight, tells me that in the seven counties of our South Roanoke Association, there are 250,000 people who live outside the life and the love of God's Church. The fields are white unto harvest, a harvest of souls.

I sense among you a growing desire to be part of that kind of harvest too. You want to be witnesses and you want to do it right. You don't want to be zealous jerks, you want to share the love of God. You don't want to be manipulative, you want to be

honest. But most of all you don't want to be silent; you want to be able to trust in the Spirit so that when you open your mouth, the Spirit will give you something true to say.

I know you struggle with this. A shrewd Christian in New York City once noted,

At fashionable dinner parties in this town, you can talk about anything. You can talk about politics, you can talk about sex, you can talk about money, you can talk about anything you want. But if you mention God more than once, you probably won't be invited back. *(Thomas G. Long, Testimony: Talking Ourselves into Being Christian, p. 3)*

Wilson is no New York City, but we are cautious about how we talk about God just the same. And yet, since our new life in Jesus Christ is the most central most important thing of our lives, we would be untruthful to our friends and neighbors and coworkers if we kept that under cover. How can we be authentic witnesses to the truth that is the greatest single truth about who we really are?

I'm reading a book by Tom Long called Testimony. He tells the story of a "young bookstore clerk named Deborah (who) arrived at work early to open the shop...

Standing at the door waiting for the store to open was a man dressed in the characteristic garments of a Hasidic Jew. As Deborah was unlocking the door, the man quietly asked if he could come in. She hesitated; it was nearly an hour before the store was supposed to open, but the man seemed polite and evidently needed something right away, so she decided to let him come in early. After turning on the lights, she said, "Would you like any help?"

Softly and with an accent he said, "Yes, I want to know about Jesus." This was not an altogether surprising request, since the store specialized in books on religion. So Deborah guided the man upstairs to the shop's ample section of books about Jesus. She pointed to shelves filled with scholarly volumes of Jesus research and books about the early history of Christianity. Then she turned to go back downstairs, but the man called her back.

"No," he said, "I want to know about Jesus the Messiah. Don't show me any more books. You tell me what you believe." Was this man asking for interfaith dialogue? For spiritual counsel? For evangelism? Deborah was unsure. All she knew was that she was being asked what she had almost never been asked before: to put her faith into words.

"My ... soul shivered," she said later, "...I gulped and told him everything I could think of...as much as I could sputter out in my confusion, in the dark."

... She did not want what she had said to transgress delicate interfaith boundaries, and she did not want to be any part of any aggressive ... "winning trophies for God," as she put it. "I am not ashamed of my faith," she wrote. "I am, and will always be, a Christian. But the God I catch glimpses of is a large-

hearted God, one to whom all hearts are open. Spiritual arrogance is inexcusable.”

With all that, Deborah told him everything she could think of about Jesus. And eventually the man chose to be baptized and became a Christian. (*Tom Long, Testimony, pp. 21-22*)

“The fields are white unto harvest.” This Thanksgiving, what harvest can we bring to God?

- Tonight at the Loyalty Dinner, we will offer to God a harvest from our personal wealth.
- Tonight we will also offer to God a harvest from our spiritual wealth, our gifts of the Spirit.
- And whenever anyone says to us, “I want to know about Jesus,” we can work together with God in yet another harvest.

A harvest of wealth...

a harvest of the Spirit...

a harvest of souls.

Come, ye thankful people, come, raise the song of harvest home.

-- Douglas E. Murray