

**Living the Fruitful Life: 3. Harvest Joy**  
**Matthew 9:35-38; 2 Corinthians 9:6, 10-11**  
**November 17, 2019**  
**Pastor Steve Richards**

The past week was a rollercoaster of emotions which is often what happens when we step outside our comfort zone, get close to the deep needs of others, and let God do what God can do in us and through us. With six others from this church and three from a church in Sauk Center, we spent the past eight days serving on your behalf in Puerto Rico. In September 2017, Hurricane Maria, a category five hurricane, made a direct hit on the island of Puerto Rico resulting in catastrophic damage and the deaths of nearly 6,000 people. Two years later, the recovery has been slow with an estimated 30,000 homes still covered with blue tarps. I was part of a work crew of five assigned to our foreman, Carlos, with the task of making a home in San Juan livable again. Vivian, a single mom with two children had been waiting two years for someone to help. When the hurricane hit her home, a tree fell on the roof and though she attempted to cover it pigeons and bats began nesting inside and along with water damage, the living space became unlivable. She was without power for six months and when she ran out of food, she sought help from the police who told her they did not know where she could find food. Eventually, drug lords in the neighborhood began supplying food. Fearing for their lives, struggling to survive, she and her children were forced to live in temporary shelter behind her carport. No real bathroom. No real kitchen. Her only water source, a garden hose. Living next to a marshy area, they can hear the caiman push against their door at night. That was life for the past two years until you showed up.

Over the course of the past week, she received a new roof, external and internal doors. Her children have asthma, so we took down the ceiling that was filled with guano from the pigeons and bats. Here I am after cutting down the bathroom ceiling and covered with guano. I was way outside my comfort zone. On Wednesday which was my final day, she received a new toilet for the bathroom, a rail for the stairway to their home which is above the carport, and kitchen sink and cabinets. Before we left Vivian's home on Wednesday, she walked into her home, now transformed – not a home that any of us would consider livable, but for her and her children, they once again had a home. And she was grateful – hugely grateful. She spoke mostly Spanish but we had an interpreter with us to translate. And I said to her, we were blessed to be able to help us. I had asked if we could take her photo but she wanted to clean up some and would allow a photo on Thursday. Then I said, I won't see you again. I am going home. And she burst into tears, the social worker who was there burst into tears, I burst into tears, and I think our interpreter did as well. Through her tears, she said, "My home is now your home. You will always be welcome here." And before we could leave, she said, I have a gift for you. What sort of a gift could someone who had nothing give us? She gave us each a small glass with two pieces of candy. The next day as I was returning home, the rest of our group completed the work and then paused for a photo. Vivian front and center. And when this photo was emailed to me, I realized this is what harvest joy looks like.

This seems like the right place to begin this morning's message. There is joy in the harvest. In preparation for this series in which we are looking at the biblical images of vines and vineyard, we visited a vineyard on the day when they were harvesting the grapes, and here's what we learned: **[video]** There is joy in the harvest. Isaac told us that prior to this year, they invited friends to pick the grapes and it became a party atmosphere, but because the grapes must be picked regardless of the weather, they hired a crew to do the harvest this year. Here's how Matthew's gospel describes the harvest.

**Jesus traveled among all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, announcing the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and every sickness. Now when Jesus saw the crowds, he had compassion for them because they were troubled and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, “The size of the harvest is bigger than you can imagine, but there are few workers. Therefore, plead with the Lord of the harvest to send out workers for his harvest.”**

What’s the harvest? It’s people. Jesus has been out in the field harvesting, drawing people back who had been alienated from God. And he was offering forgiveness and healing and deliverance to those oppressed by demons in their lives. Jesus has been harvesting but he says, there is only one of me. There is this great need in the world. **“The size of the harvest is bigger than you can imagine, but there are few workers. Therefore, plead with the Lord of the harvest to send out workers for his harvest.”** Who will Jesus send out? He’s saying to his disciples – it’s your job to go out into the fields and harvest. And I think Jesus still says to those who will listen that there is still a lot of hurt and pain and brokenness in this world: Who will go and offer them grace and mercy and the love of God? Would you? Would we? What’s interesting is that we are both the harvest and the harvest-workers. It’s like this diagram that I’ve used before: There is the world as it is, and then there is the world that God intended (kingdom of God), and our job is to bridge the gap. That’s what we do by God’s grace when we allow the Holy Spirit to work within us. When Jesus saw the crowds, he had compassion. He sees hurting people and he goes to them. But the harvest is so big that he needs workers. Our work as Messiah Church is guided by these two statements: **Our vision is to go build relationships, transforming lives through deep meaningful connections with others. Our mission is to grow disciples of Jesus Christ through loving God, loving each other, and loving the world.** We come here and then we go out into the vineyard to share faith, to offer care, and to love those in need. We’ve been live streaming our Sunday worship for the past two years and within the past year, we’ve had a group of people at one of our senior living communities gather to participate in the live stream – many of them have never been in this building but consider this to be their church. Recently, I received this note from one of them. (read note) There was a time when Jesus told a parable about a farmer who went out and scattered seed – some fell on rocky soil, some fell among the weeds, but some fell on soil and grew. Our job is to scatter the seeds and then work the harvest. A few weeks ago, I wondered what would happen if all 500 of us would leave here and offer words of kindness, some act that would bless others – and if we could do that once a day for seven days that would be 3500 acts of kindness and if somehow we could continue that through the next year, that would be 182,000 acts of kindness. There is joy in the harvest.

In the Bible, we find a Jewish festival called SUKKOT in the fall of the year. Sukkot remembers when Jews lived in tents for forty years before they would enter the Promised Land. The festival coincides with the grape harvest in the fall of the year. People would build temporary shelters or tabernacles during the harvest where they would eat and sleep. As they celebrated the harvest, they also gave thanks that God supplied the sustenance they needed to survive in the wilderness and reach the Promised Land. Even today, there are families that will build their own tabernacle for this seven day festival of thanksgiving. This morning we begin our own Thanksgiving which we also call Commitment Sunday. In the first century, people would bring the first 10<sup>th</sup> of their harvest to God. They recognized that everything they had was a gift. So much of what led up to the harvest was beyond their control and they were grateful for what they had. The first tenth represented the best of what they had and they would offer it to God. That tenth was called a tithe. Today that seems like an outdated idea – to give away a tenth. Nobody can do that. It’s not realistic. And that’s what I thought until I got married. I’ve told this story before. Amanda and I had this conversation the first fall that we were married. Should we

give to the church? And she said, we will tithe. And I said, yes dear. In those days, I was paid on the first day of the month for the month ahead. Paid in advance and after making the deposit, the first check that I wrote was to the church. I was serving two church at that time so I divided the amount equally between the two churches. Through the years, it hasn't always been easy to write that check, but we have always been grateful that we could. I know some of you share a similar story. I have never met anyone who tithes who didn't say it was a blessing.

If we wait until we address our needs before we tithe, here's what I think happens – we will never do it. It's like these grapes. Let's say these ten grapes represent all the resources that we have for the year. It probably takes at least three of them for our house – mortgage, rent, utilities. Then one or two for our cars. Then there is medical expenses. There is food and eating out, clothing, and entertainment. We try to put aside something for savings or retirement. And then there's one grape left. There is always something else we need, so we can't give it all. Maybe I can give half. But the grape is so good there's always something else until all that's left is the stem. I wish I had more but God this is all I have. God, I am grateful. My whole life is a gift. So here – thank you. My point is not to make you feel bad if you find that you've eaten the last grape – that's life. My point is the value in offering God first. It changes our lives. It matters.

We read what Paul writes to the church in Corinth. The Christians in Jerusalem were experiencing a famine, and he asks Christian in Corinth to send an offering to help them – people they had never and would never meet. **The one who sows a small number of seeds will also reap a small crop, and the one who sows a generous amount of seeds will also reap a generous crop.** He's saying there is a rhythm to life. We receive and we give back. Some think giving is all we talk about in church and could not be further from the truth. There is rhythm to life, and we were made for giving. So when you bring your card this morning, I hope you do so with joy, grateful for all God has given. Each year when I bring my card, I am nearly overcome with emotion because I am that grateful. There is joy in the harvest. In case you are wondering what the harvest looks like, take a look **[video]**

If this is your church family, I want to invite you to take the commitment card that you brought with you or that you received with your bulletin. If you would hold it in your hand as we pray:

*Thank you, God, for everything. Thank you for my life, for the people in my life. Thank you for sustaining me when life is hard and forgiving me when I mess up. Thank you for sending Jesus to show me the way and in his death and resurrection offering me the promise of eternal life. Thank you for this church and all of the amazing ways you work through the people of this church to offer compassion and hope to others. May my commitment this day be an expression of my love and gratitude for you. May it be an investment in the work you do through this church. I love you, Lord. Amen.*

### **Grow, Pray, Study for Week of November 17, 2019**

**Weekly Prayer:** God of soil, seed and harvest, and God of us all: We are your richly planted, ripening people in various stages of faith. We pray that in this hour you will water our souls, brighten our minds, strengthen our roots, and touch our hearts, so that we might be filled with a generosity of spirit to sow your seeds as needed in this world. Amen.

## Monday, November 18

### Scripture: 2 Corinthians 9:6-15

What I mean is this: the one who sows a small number of seeds will also reap a small crop, and the one who sows a generous amount of seeds will also reap a generous crop. Everyone should give whatever they have decided in their heart. They shouldn't give with hesitation or because of pressure. God loves a cheerful giver. God has the power to provide you with more than enough of every kind of grace. That way, you will have everything you need always and in everything to provide more than enough for every kind of good work. As it is written, *He scattered everywhere; he gave to the needy; his righteousness remains forever.* The one who supplies seed for planting and bread for eating will supply and multiply your seed and will increase your crop, which is righteousness. You will be made rich in every way so that you can be generous in every way. Such generosity produces thanksgiving to God through us. Your ministry of this service to God's people isn't only fully meeting their needs but it is also multiplying in many expressions of thanksgiving to God. They will give honor to God for your obedience to your confession of Christ's gospel. They will do this because this service provides evidence of your obedience, and because of your generosity in sharing with them and with everyone. They will also pray for you, and they will care deeply for you because of the outstanding grace that God has given to you. Thank God for his gift that words can't describe!

**Observation:** "God has the power to provide you with more than enough of every kind of grace" (verse 8). "You will be made rich in every way" (verse 11). The apostle Paul, a roving preacher who owned, it would seem, no real estate, life insurance, or retirement plan, wrote those words! Even to people who lived in the large city of Corinth, he used the language of harvest, of God increasing their crop. He challenged them (and us) to rethink what "rich" and "more than enough" really mean. God sows generously. He asks us to produce a generous harvest.

### Did You Know?

If you're a Messiah member who was not able to be in worship last Sunday, or were not quite ready to make your 2020 giving commitment, you can go to [messiahchurch.org](http://messiahchurch.org) to do it online. Thank you!

**Application:** Paul did not invent the idea that "God loves a cheerful giver." 2 Chronicles 31:4-10 said that after King Hezekiah's call to supply the Temple, "the Israelites generously gave the best of their grain, new wine, oil, honey, and all their crops—a tenth of everything, a huge amount." Why would God want us to give from free, grateful hearts without coercion or pressure? When have you felt the joy of giving freely from a grateful heart of love?

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, you gave, literally, all you had to give for me "for the sake of the joy" laid out in front of you (Hebrews 12:2). Teach me more each day about the joy of generosity. Amen.

## Tuesday, November 19

### Scripture: Leviticus 19:9-10; Deuteronomy 24:19-22

When you harvest your land's produce, you must not harvest all the way to the edge of your field; and don't gather up every remaining bit of your harvest. Also do not pick your vineyard clean or gather up all the grapes that have fallen there. Leave these items for the poor and the immigrant; I am the LORD your God.

Whenever you are reaping the harvest of your field and you leave some grain in the field, don't go back and get it. Let it go to the immigrants, the orphans, and the widows so that the LORD

your God blesses you in all that you do. Similarly, when you beat the olives off your olive trees, don't go back over them twice. Let the leftovers go to the immigrants, the orphans, and the widows. Again, when you pick the grapes of your vineyard, don't pick them over twice. Let the leftovers go to the immigrants, the orphans, and the widows. Remember how you were a slave in Egypt. That's why I am commanding you to do this thing.

**Observation:** In the Old Testament Scriptures, it was largely a rural world of farming, with sowing (planting) and harvesting. They were instructed to leave part of the crops for the poor and the sojourner. Harvest was an indicator of their obedience to the moral obligations of their covenant with God. Even as farmers gathered the crops to sustain themselves and their families, the religious law told them to remember those who did not have a crop of their own to gather.

**Application:** In the Old Testament book of Ruth, Boaz, a well-off farmer, let Ruth, a Moabite migrant, glean in his fields to help her mother-in-law Naomi. This led to their marriage, the start of a family that produced King David, and, centuries later, Jesus (Matthew 1:5-16). When have you seen a seemingly small act of sharing (in resources, time or talent) start good results far greater than the giver expected? (There's no telling what God may do with even what we see as a small act of generosity.)

**Prayer:** Lord of the harvest, help me never to become so obsessed with what more I can get that I forget to notice what I might give. Shape me into a faithful, generous steward of all you give to me. Amen.

### **Wednesday, November 20**

**Scripture: Galatians 5:22-25; 2 Peter 1:4-8**

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against things like this. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the self with its passions and its desires. If we live by the Spirit, let's follow the Spirit.

Through his honor and glory he has given us his precious and wonderful promises, that you may share the divine nature and escape from the world's immorality that sinful craving produces. This is why you must make every effort to add moral excellence to your faith; and to moral excellence, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, endurance; and to endurance, godliness; and to godliness, affection for others; and to affection for others, love. If all these are yours and they are growing in you, they'll keep you from becoming inactive and unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.

**Observation:** To the Galatians, Paul described the positive qualities that come when we let the Holy Spirit bear his fruit in our lives. (Fruit, of course, is what people harvest from vineyards and orchards. And we are God's vineyard.) Although Peter didn't specifically use fruit language, he pointed to the way in which our energy and effort work with God's power to transform our inner being to bear the qualities God desires for us.

**Application:** Peter said we must "make every effort" to build these positive traits into our life. In his commentary, N. T. Wright wrote, "Peter is urging his readers to...become more fully human, he says, by building one aspect of Christian character on top of another: faith, virtue, knowledge, self-control, patience, piety, family affection, and finally love. All these take thought;

all these take effort. They don't happen by accident." What daily choices are you making to allow God's power to build a noble, fruitful character in you?

**Prayer:** Lord God, guide me to the choices and activities I need to bear the kind of fruit in my life for which you have planted me. Amen.

### Thursday, November 21

**Scripture: Matthew 13:24-30**

Jesus told them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like someone who planted good seed in his field. While people were sleeping, an enemy came and planted weeds among the wheat and went away. When the stalks sprouted and bore grain, then the weeds also appeared. "The servants of the landowner came and said to him, 'Master, didn't you plant good seed in your field? Then how is it that it has weeds?' "An enemy has done this,' he answered. "The servants said to him, 'Do you want us to go and gather them?' "But the landowner said, 'No, because if you gather the weeds, you'll pull up the wheat along with them. Let both grow side by side until the harvest. And at harvest time I'll say to the harvesters, "First gather the weeds and tie them together in bundles to be burned. But bring the wheat into my barn.'""

**Observation:** Jesus' story reminds us that we need to focus on the fruit we are bearing for God to harvest from our lives. When the servants asked to pull out the weeds, the master said, "No, because if you gather the weeds, you'll pull up the wheat along with them." It is not our job to "weed out" others for bearing bad fruit. We couldn't do it accurately. That is God's task; ours is to make sure we bear good fruit come harvest time.

**Application:** What Jesus described did happen in Palestine. There was a slightly poisonous weed (*lolium temulentum*) that, until mature, looked almost exactly like a young wheat plant. It seems that part of Jesus' teaching was that we are far too quick to see people as "good" or "bad" based on very partial knowledge about them. What helps you avoid judging people too quickly based on limited information?

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, free me from the inner wish to "play God" over others, to do your work. Keep me growing the fruit of your spirit in my life, including the fruit of patience. Amen.

### Friday, November 22

**Scripture: Matthew 9:36-38**

Now when Jesus saw the crowds, he had compassion for them because they were troubled and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, "The size of the harvest is bigger than you can imagine, but there are few workers. Therefore, plead with the Lord of the harvest to send out workers for his harvest."

**Observation:** Jesus worked tirelessly to restore people to physical, emotional and spiritual wholeness. There's no record that he farmed any land; instead he sought a harvest of transformed people. Our DNA as Messiah Church is rooted in Jesus' actions and teaching. Like him, we believe the harvest is bigger than we can even imagine. God calls us to devote all we have—our energy, talents and finances—to helping gather that harvest.

**Application:** Since you have welcomed Jesus and the light he brings to your life, how have you seen God work in unexpected ways in you? Through you in the lives of others you know? Reaching "fields ripe for the harvest" is a major focus in our current strategic planning. How can

you identify people in your circle of influence who may be particularly receptive to God's love if you share it with them?

**Prayer:** Lord God, one way I can bear fruit for you is to share the good news of your love and grace with people who don't know you yet. Help me know how best to use my contacts and abilities to help reap the harvest for which you long. Amen.

**Saturday, November 23**

**Scripture: John 15:5-8**

I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, then you will produce much fruit. Without me, you can't do anything. If you don't remain in me, you will be like a branch that is thrown out and dries up. Those branches are gathered up, thrown into a fire, and burned. If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask for whatever you want and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified when you produce much fruit and in this way prove that you are my disciples.

**Observation:** We have learned during this series that Israel loved the image of their people as a vineyard God had planted. But one of Jesus' sweeping, startling claims was that Israel's faith found its fullest expression in him. "I am the vine" dramatically altered the way people usually thought about the vineyard image. But in personalizing himself as "the vine," Jesus also made another vital point clear. Jesus-followers do not commit ourselves to an abstract set of ideas; we commit ourselves to the person of our divine-human Savior.

**Application:** "Producing fruit" was, of course, an image of what a vineyard-keeper expects the carefully-tended vine branches to do. How can you go about your daily business committed to bearing fruit for God without becoming obsessed with externals or turning your spiritual commitment into a dry, detailed set of rules you must follow to earn salvation? Sometimes "ask for whatever you want" confuses us. But remember: the preface to that was "If you remain in me." What kinds of things would a person who was fully abiding in Christ ask for?

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, you are the vine, I am a branch. You want me to bear fruit, and I need your inner sustenance to guide and empower me to do that. I want to abide in you forever. Amen.