

Farming in the Spirit

2 Corinthians 5:17, Mark 4:26-29

Are you a farmer? Do you know any farmers? My grandfathers were both farmers. I don't know a great deal about my father's father, only that he had a dream to raise cattle. It was a dream that was deferred and ultimately destroyed through larceny and a phony land deal that cost him his life and cost my father his father. I knew my mother's father well. He was a dairy farmer in northern Virginia. Now he also grew corn. It was a hard life and a good one. Farming doesn't just happen. To be successful takes a process of planning, preparation, good materials, and lots of hard work.

Jesus' story had a farmer just seem to throw seed on the ground, go to bed, and wake to discover the results. How's that for agricultural technique? First-century farming technique did involve scattering the seed and then scratching the ground to cover it up. There was a certain amount of "hope for best" in that approach and the results were seen as a surprise, a mystery, and a miracle.

Is this just bad farming? Do we approach spiritual growth in a similar way? Does it lead to good spirituality? Surprisingly, maybe it does! With haphazard technique, the seed sprouts, the crop grows, and the harvest can still be gathered.

We ourselves are God's own field, fruit unto God's praise to yield. 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.

Let's be clear -- Jesus was not advocating either shoddy farming or shoddy spirituality. Good work leads to a good harvest, but the miracle of growth, whether it's agricultural or spiritual, is truly a mystery and a miracle that is beyond our control.

It is a mystery how we grow in the Spirit and get more in touch with God. It is a miracle how we discover who we are and become more who God created us to be. It just happens with life. Much of it is out of our control, but there are things we can do to enable that growth to take place. First, we need to be intentional. What farmer doesn't plan what crop to grow? Farmers don't plant seeds for a crop without having a good idea of what that crop is – what is going to grow and the nature of what the harvest will be.

Spiritually speaking, what crop are we? What harvest do we seek? What is our intent and into what do we intend to grow? Farming takes an investment of capital for space, equipment, and seed. In this, farming is like church which also takes a tremendous investment of energy and skill. As church, our crop is worth growing, but the work is not easy. The question is, "what crop are we seeking to become?" Another helpful way to ask the question is, "what are we all about as church?" "What business, ultimately, are we in?"

What business are we in when it comes to church? The answer depends, of course, on who you ask. Some say we're in the business of winning converts to Christianity so more people can be saved. By saved, they usually mean to enable people to go to heaven when they die. I believe it is right to have a concern for people's salvation. How people relate to God and each other is definitely church business, yet I see salvation less as a reward for believing and more as a term describing how we participate in God's nature here and now. Salvation has to do with how we,

as spiritual beings who are growing and taking on the nature of Jesus. Regarding eternal life, eternity is a characteristic of God and we are all held within the life of God eternally -- always now.

Some will tell you that we are in the business of showing God's love by providing charitable aid and support for people on the margins of life. I agree that meeting the immediate needs of hurting people is a vital part of church business as long as we don't limit ourselves to just the "first aid" of ministry without working to correct the root causes of that suffering.

Others say that church is a mechanism for changing oppressive social structures and making the world more a place of justice and peace. I agree that we are called to a prophetic ministry of changing unjust policies and structures in society as an expression of divine love. We must remember that it is the Spirit who animates us and enlivens our work. Social justice is only meaningful as an expression of the life we are living in the Spirit. It's like the story of Ezekiel in the Valley of Dry Bones. Once the dead bones had been re-assembled into bodies, and even after the muscle, connective tissue, and skin and come onto the bones, they were still dead. Only the Spirit, the breath of God, could enliven them and can enliven us!

Still others see the church as a sacred tradition to be preserved. Faithfulness is found in that preservation. I agree! We are stewards of a sacred tradition, though added layers of belief and practice often threaten to make the core of that tradition unrecognizable.

Church is a business, but it is a mistake for us to see church as a commodity to be sold. Good business practices are important so that the institutional church remains solvent and provides space for the Spirit community to live and thrive, but church is a gift of the Spirit. Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote, "The Holy Spirit is the continuing community creating reality that moves through history" "An Experiment in Love," *Jubilee*, September 1958, pp.11f) The church in general and Crossroads Church in particular is a gift we have the opportunity and obligation to "re-gift" and share.

Finding a good balance between being a community and being a business is not an exact science. It's more an art. As a business, however, our product is not God. Rather we are God's product. We are in the business of changing people, in partnership with the Spirit – people who will change the world. Jesus invites us all to take up our cross and follow each day.

Every life needs a vision -- every business too. What is our vision as church? It is said that the dream of God for creation is summarized in the idea of *Shalom* – the oneness of humanity – that we are connected with each other and all of life. The vision we share as pilgrims in the Spirit, as church and as communities of faith, is to cooperate with the Spirit in the realization of God's dream. *Shalom* is the direction of the change we seek – peace in the world, peace in our hearts, and peace in our community.

For us to cooperate in the realization of that dream requires that we embrace our own dreams and our own uniqueness. We have the right and our responsibility to be different. Partnership with God requires that we respect diversity and the rights of others to be different. This includes different religious traditions. It requires us to trust that the best way to express the mystery of

the reality of God in this world is for us to be the best Jews, the best Christians, the best Muslims, on and on, that we can be – the best people and the best people of faith we can be.

How will we accomplish this? How can we realize God's dream? What seed can we plant for such a harvest? What is the plan, whether it's a business plan or a farming plan, to grow this faith? It takes commitment to exercise: meditate every day at least fifteen to twenty minutes in order to open our awareness and release conscious thinking. Also, pray every day for what you see and need. And always prayer that God's will be done so that relationships will grow together and we will be open to growth, the ability to love and value and accept.

Crossroads Church has a dream, a vision to cooperate in the realization of God's dream. We believe that the truest expression of faith is this: around, through, in between, and because of our differences, God is revealed. Dr. James Forbes, Pastor Emeritus of the Riverside Church in New York City shared something recently that applies to Crossroads Church and to each of you who read these words. I paraphrase him: "I saw a dream walking. I saw a dream talking. And the dream I saw walking and talking was you."

As people of faith, we commit our time, talents, and treasures. We give our lives to grow, to be born, to be created, and to become ourselves. Let us commit, each one, to the vision before us: to walk in this truth and to live as church in the miracle of new creation. Be the dream and help the world be reborn.