

Turning Soil
La Verne Church of the Brethren
Dawna Welch
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Galatians 6:9 / Mark 4:26-29

Message:

Raise your hand if you're done with 2020. I mean c'mon! I have been hearing a new term in op-eds and news pieces. The term is "Pandemic Fatigue" and I think it is born out of deep truth for many of us, for lots of different reasons. Of course the sense of fatigue is from more than just the pandemic itself - I know I don't need to run that list for you. You're all too aware. But, for clarification, I am using the term "pandemic fatigue" as an umbrella term for everything going on in our country. Everything that has been exposed by the occurrence of COVID19; including the most partisan and contentious presidential election in my life time. Last week, Julie Wheeler talked to us about confession. Here's mine: I am pretty worn down. I just want to give up and go to bed. Wake me up when 2020 is over!

If you too are feeling the weight of these precarious days, I invite you to consider the scripture texts that Dominic and Mike read for us - through the eyes of a farmer. Now stay with me! It is November after all, the season of autumn, a time for gathering harvest. And Jesus' was addressing people living in an agrarian society, people familiar with working the land, managing livestock, and raising crops. Sowing and reaping are reoccurring themes in the Bible. Themes that represent everything from describing the natural world, to receiving God's blessing, to the spiritual implications of waiting, and probably the most famous analogy of all; One reaps what one sows! Farming lends itself to some great spiritual lessons.

The farmer, perhaps more than most, knows something about faith. She knows she can't control the bounty of her harvest or fluctuations in the weather. Daily she comes face to face with the reality that her livelihood is absolutely beholden to her Maker. One article I read said it this way, "We are Farmers; at the mercy of God, reliant upon God's grace, and certain of God's care".

Farming is hard work. It is circadian, perennial, and has always only just begun. Farmers meticulously prepare the soil in their fields for planting. They take soil samples to ensure the proper amount of macro- and micronutrients are present. They form a solid fertilizer strategy to help seeds reach their full potential before projected harvest dates. They establish a crop protection plan taking into consideration projected weather conditions and their farm's history of pests, weeds and diseases. There is science behind this process and painstaking attention to detail. But, once those seeds are in the ground God alone knows when the rain is going to fall, when the heat is going to rise or when it's the right time for those little seeds to push up from the darkness into light. So, it's no wonder that scripture encourages us to look to the farmer as an example of faith.

In my own life I recognize the need to look to the farmer. Right now I feel weary because the work is so demanding and the harvest appears so far into the future. It feels like everyday we are faced with new challenges and uncertainties. What worked last Fall doesn't work this Fall. Hell - what worked last week doesn't work this week. I could use the farmer's big picture, deep roots, long haul, perspective right about now. Putting ourselves in a position to trust God is to realize that things may not resolve the way we want or when we want, but there will be a resolution and it may not be as bad as we feared. My husband Jeff teaches middle school in Etiwanda - online. He is not required to work on campus but he chooses to do so for a multitude of good reasons. Teaching online was definitely a curve ball for teachers but he is several months in and finding his rhythm. Well 2020 can't have that! This past Monday Jeff was evacuated - EVACUATED from his school campus due to hurricane force wind gusts that caused trees to fall and clay tiles to be blown off the roof. In his 26 years of teaching at this campus he has never experienced winds to this degree. So much so, that people were scared and worried about getting off campus safely- some even had to temporarily shelter in place. There was damage to cars in the parking lot but thankfully no one was hurt. And that may not have been the case if the 1,100 students enrolled in this school would have been meeting on campus rather than virtually. Moments like these demonstrate - in real time - how our lives, like the farmer's, provide for ongoing opportunities of learning to trust - despite what we can or can't see coming.

Otis Moss III is senior pastor of Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago. His father, Otis Moss Jr., was an influential pastor and civil rights leader based in Cleveland. So, not surprisingly perhaps, Otis Moss III grew up with legendary civil rights figures in and out of his family home. Though he never met him in person, Howard Thurman, pastor to the pastors and author of *Jesus of the Disinherited* was influential in Moss's spiritual development. On the podcast, On Being with Krista Tippett, Moss shares a story he absolutely loves about Thurman. It is actually a story about Thurman's grandmother, whom he adored. She owned property and worked some land adjacent to the land of an elderly white woman who did not like the fact that a Black woman owned land. So, she set out to teach Thurman's grandmother a lesson. Every night she would scoop out all the manure from her chicken coop and dump it on Thurman's grandmothers garden destroying everything she was growing. Thurmans grandmother did not retaliate. Nor did she lose sleep over this process. Once she realized this wasn't going to stop she set out every morning and just mixed the manure into the soil where her garden used to be. And so it continued. The old woman would dump at night, and Thurman's grandmother would turn it over in the morning. In an act of faith, Thurman's grandmother just kept turning the soil.

Eventually the elderly neighbor fell ill — and apparently she wasn't just mean to Black people, she was mean to everybody, and nobody came to see her. But Thurman's grandmother did. She went next door with flowers in hand. The neighbor was completely shocked that this woman, whom she had been so cruel to, would actually come and see her. And she was so deeply moved by this act of kindness. When Thurman's

grandmother placed the flowers next to the old woman, she said, "These are the most beautiful flowers I've ever seen. Where'd you get them?" Thurman's grandmother said, "You helped me make them, because when you were dumping manure in my yard ... I decided to plant some roses." Thurman's grandmother trusted God. She did not try to change the narrative of the situation she found herself in, or the behavior of the elderly woman. She just kept turning the soil trusting that God would turn that manure into something new. Only God knows if the seeds planted that day would push up from the darkness into the light.

Manure happens folks - 2020 is living proof of that! If you find yourself staring at barren fields wondering if your labors even matter or will amount to anything in the end, have faith! We serve a good and faithful God who creates possibility for newness where we see only waste.

I know that this election is weighing heavy on your hearts and minds. I know you are losing sleep over the outcome. You have been working hard, toiling in the fields and analyzing the soil. You have formed a solid strategy to help your seeds reach their full potential. You have even considered the projected weather conditions and history of pests, weeds and diseases for this election. And by now most of you have likely planted your seed at a safe and secure planting location. Working for justice is hard. It is circadian, and perennial. It is the work our grandmother's began and work we are called to continue as a community of faith. So, when you have done all you can in this moment, it's time to place yourself in a position of trust and get some rest. Because regardless of what happens on November 3, whether your candidate loses or whether your candidate wins there will be work to do on November 4.

Amen