

Plant, Harvest, Hope

Jeffrey DeYoe
Covenant Presbyterian Church
Fort Myers, Florida

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Mark 4:2-9, 26-32

In Kansas, the wheat harvest was complete by the middle of July, but farmers there are now in the middle of the corn harvest as well as in Iowa, Illinois and many other Midwestern states. But because of modern farming methods, even while harvesting corn, Kansas farmers are also planting the winter wheat that will be harvested in 2016. Along the Red River of the north that forms the boundary between North Dakota and Minnesota, they are right in the middle of the sugar beet harvest, which is one of the most intense harvests I have seen anywhere in the United States. In fact, it is so intense they call it a campaign, and it goes 24/7 for two to three weeks nonstop. This means that up in those parts, World Communion Sunday is one of the most poorly attended Sundays in the year simply because all the sugar beet farmers and families are out working.

Sugar beets are a funny crop because it is amazing to me that someone actually looked at one of these things and thought they could get a sugar crop out of it. And the process of getting granular sugar out of a beet is no easy thing. There are co-ops all over the upper Midwest that have a very complex process of extracting the sugar from the beet. For the most part, the co-ops start hiring their seasonal help at the end of August to get ready for harvest, to get the plants ready, and then when it all begins they are going gangbusters for the next 3-5 months.

There is a science to harvesting the sugar beet. You have to measure the actual weight of the beet against the sugar content, which is always a fluctuating number and there is a formula that tells you when the sugar to weight ratio is optimum. But the success of the campaign is not just about the beet itself. They are watching the weather looking for the first freeze to occur. The reason for this is because when the campaign starts, so many beets are being harvested the processing plants cannot accommodate all of them. So throughout the countryside, there are "beet stations" where mountains of beets are stacked up in a holding pattern until the plant can send trucks out to get them. The problem is that the beets in those stacks have to remain frozen while they wait for several weeks, otherwise the moisture and heat in the middle of the piles will cause them to rot from the inside out. So, it is possible to have a great sugar to weight ratio and yet it is not cold enough to start the campaign yet. Then by the time it is cold enough, that ratio is not as good as it could have been and the farmers lose money. But finally, the co-op decides the time has come to start the campaign and says "go!" And that's when things get busy. You are not allowed to harvest until they tell you, so you just sit around until that moment when it all gets crazy.

When I was a pastor in NW Minnesota, some of the farmers in my congregation often had me come out and experience the beet campaign, even in the middle of the night, just to get a taste of

what that is like. It is all automated and you spend most of your time in the cab of a big tractor or a truck, but it is tiring work. The beet ground can get so mucky in the rain that the loaded beet trucks sometimes sink right down to the axles; and inevitably every year a driver or two gets so tired, they overturn their beet trucks on the highway in the wee hours of the morning.

There is something about living in a community that plants and then waits for the harvest. There is a spirit of patience you have to have, although some farmers are better at it than others. I remember one year after planting season and the rains came nonstop and flooded most of the crops out that year, I asked one of the farmers in my congregation whether or not it drove him crazy. *Nope... he said, I learned years ago that if you are going to be in this business you need to accept that the good Lord is going to do what he does and there is nothing you can do about it. When I complain that my crop needs rain, someone growing a different crop thinks the conditions are perfect. So you gotta give a little in order to get a little.*

Most farmers, not all, but most, are people of faith for the simple reason that they are close to the earth, and they watch the seasons and the growing process every year of their lives. They seem to instinctively know that this sort of thing does not happen without One who has set it all in motion from the very beginning of time.

So because of the fact that I served as a pastor to farmers for 15 out of my 35 years in ministry, back in February 2014 when I led a team to Palestine to plant olive trees I just knew that at some point I would want to return in order to see and experience the harvest as well.

The Palestinian farmers I encountered over a year ago reminded me of the farmers I knew so well in Kansas and Minnesota. I noticed right away their strong, calloused hands. That's a dead giveaway that you are shaking hands with a farmer. The weather-beaten face is also a good clue. Some of the farmers we encountered in Palestine spoke some English, which made them excellent hosts than we were guests because none of us knew Arabic. When it comes to speaking languages, Palestinians can often be tri-lingual, speaking Arabic, Hebrew and English. There are many cultural differences, and Palestinians, both Christian and Muslim, are generally much more conservative in their customs than we are here in the States. But even while there are language and cultural obstacles, I still felt connected to the life because it all felt wonderfully familiar. One day after working all morning planting olive trees, some farm trucks pulled up and the family started unloading what turned out to be the feast that we would eat for lunch right out there in the field where we had been planting. And I had a *déjà vu*-all-over-again feeling because I remember being with Kansas farmers when at midday the wives would bring "dinner" out to the fields for us to eat.

Although this may sound incredibly simple-minded, sometimes because of my upbringing and early days in ministry I cannot help but sometimes think to myself that the solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is to get rid of all the politicians on both sides and put the farmers in charge. In fact, in the early history of Palestine before there was a modern-day Israel, or a conflict, Palestinian and Jewish neighbors farmed side-by-side in a spirit of mutual respect. It all fell apart when ideological leaders from Europe decided they wanted something that did not belong to them.

Just as it takes patience as a farmer in Kansas or Minnesota who are raising entirely different crops, I saw the patience it takes to be a Palestinian farmer in the West Bank. But the patience is not so much about what the weather might do to crops, because it is pretty consistent and olive trees are very sturdy and long-lived. The patience has to do with how to get the crop in with the politics swirling all about them, or how to make it to harvest before other human beings destroy it. We saw the fields where illegal Israeli settlers poisoned the ground so that all those old olive trees stood there black and dead. We saw where the trees had been uprooted by the Israeli military to be taken back to Israel and replanted in Israeli fields. We saw where settlers had come in with chainsaws and cut trees down. And we were there when the military commander showed up with his platoon, made us all stop working, made the farmer produce ownership papers, and then called it all in for verification, which takes an hour or more, even though they knew that this land belonged to this farmer because it has been in his family for centuries. That takes a patience that is even more difficult than waiting for the rain to come, the flood waters to recede or the sugar beet company to say it is okay to start the campaign.

In 2000 an outbreak of violence began in Israel and Palestine known as the Second Intifada, which is well known to most of us because the primary weapon used by Palestinians against Israeli occupation were suicide bombers. I was there for the first time in 2001 while that war was raging, and it was the first and only time I was ever in a nation where an actual war was taking place. And, it was a war waged by politicians: those who controlled the largest military in the Middle East and those who were able to influence and manipulate an army of young, impressionable Palestinians to do something terrible. As time wore on, Palestinian society itself grew weary and cynical about the willingness of some to allow their young adult sons and daughters to die in this terrible way. Palestinian Christians, who have been ecumenical partners with U.S. Presbyterians, Episcopalians, Lutherans, Congregationalists and others for generations started asking the U.S. church for help by simply supporting the Palestinian church's call for peaceful rather than violent resistance. In 2004 our General Assembly created the Israel Palestine Mission Network for the purpose of partnering with Palestinian Christians and Muslims who dedicated themselves to peaceful, non-violent solutions to the ongoing conflict. As with all things Presbyterian, it took awhile for the actual network to organize, but I was there in 2006 when it did and have been in a leadership position ever since. The mission statement, and the goal of this network is to partner with all Palestinians, Christian and Muslim alike, who seek peace and are committed to the tools of non-violence to accomplish that. This is what World Communion Sunday is all about.

It will be of no surprise to you that our denomination is divided about this question. So even though the General Assembly brought us into being for the express purpose of helping to give voice to Palestinian cries for peace and justice, there are a lot Presbyterians who have fought our initiatives for the past decade. I will say that in 2006 when I began as the advocacy chairperson, I felt like a lone wolf crying in the wilderness. Ten years later, now as moderator, most mainline denominations have parallel movements, and we are now being joined by more and more evangelical U.S. churches, and secular society is presently way ahead of us. After 10 years of being on the steering committee without a break, I can honestly say that there are times when all of this wearies me and all I want to do is get involved in a mission where I don't get called terrible names on the Internet.

And that is when I go planting, or now, harvesting, and it is when I go to find hope, but more importantly to offer hope. In February 2014, Palestinian farmers told me that our being in the field with them gave them hope that they weren't alone and that someone out there understood that all they want to do is earn a living off their land, raise their children, worship God in freedom and have a life. I pretty much hate the political games of our church on this issue, but you can't do social justice without getting caught in politics. After all, Jesus actually died a political death. But this is what he said, that keeps giving me hope and fuels me for the trip upon which we embark tomorrow: *And yet when (that mustard seed) is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.*

Imagine such a world. It's that hope that makes me go back to pick olives.

Amen.