Jereremiah 1:4-10, John 4:31-42

“Is reaping better than sowing?”

Have you found yourself captivated by the Olympic games this year? Every games there is a specific image that normally is emblazoned on our minds. I’ll never forget Kerri Strug and her one foot landing. This year there haven’t been any one individual image that has struck me but as a collective image there is one and that is the smiles of our athletes that have been absolutely contagious. Our Gabby who has a smile that is all teeth, or Missy Franklin with a smile that is so much like a girlish teenager, the passionate smile of the veteran Michael Phelps almost daring anyone who might not be rejoicing with him.

That smile represents in so many ways the final accomplishment of a journey that has not necessarily been long, but it has certainly been very, very hard and grueling. It is the reaping of a reward after a very, very difficult journey of sowing. Practice is never fun. Rachel and I have been getting up early in the mornings to train with tennis, and both of us would much rather stay in bed. I have been on both the receiving and the training end of practice, what I call sowing. It is such a gamble, you never know if you are going to have a result or not. And after you risk by putting in the time you want to skip right to the reward part of it. But you just have to trust that if you put in the time and the effort and follow a prescribed path then some reaping, some reward will follow. But that sowing part is never fun.

This summer it seems as if team USA has done a great job both in sowing and reaping. Our 2nd Scripture today Jesus speaks of sowing and reaping. We know from his parables that sowing is traditionally seen as spreading the Gospel which is welcoming souls to Christ and members into the church. Is one better than the other, meaning, does God smile more on the sower or the reaper. It sounds like a rhetorical question, but it really isn’t.

Are some people or some churches better equipped to do one and not the other or some both or some neither? Jeremiah and our Savior Jesus both have something to say about that. Let’s read.

**READ**

I just realized as I was preparing for this sermon that 3 out of the 4 churches that I have served have had a very strong agricultural component to them. It is not at all part of my background, but it is just he way it has worked out.

Our first call in Italy we served a church whose members watched over fields of olive trees and vineyards . They didn’t do much planting, but the harvest season was always intense. In Florida, we were in the potato capital of that region. The town next to us was called spuds. Here I continue to learn about farming, but seem to favor the harvesting after all the hard work has already been done by someone else. And this is the primary image that Jesus uses to get his point across to his disciples.

If you look at our John Scripture starting at verse 35 he begins by talking about the sowing and the 4 months needed before the reaping can take place. Did you know that in the 10th century BC the Gezer calendar reflected exactly a 4 month’s time period between sowing and reaping.

But Jesus tells his disciples you can start reaping now, you can begin because the fields are ready. Don’t worry about the sowing part, because it has already been done. Not by you, but it has been done. Now they take him literally and have no idea what he was talking about, they were fishermen after all, not farmers. But from this end of history we can add some understanding to it.

Jesus is saying that others have gone out and sowed. The prophets, John the Baptist, even his own words with the woman that produced results and allowed the villagers to begin making their way to them to hear about the Good News. Now you will, if you obey my commandments and go out and reap, you will take in the fruit. We see the disciples do that and even in Acts of the Apostles, we see the thousands of people who come and not necessarily because of their work, but rather Jesus’ reputation that preceded them.

They were able to have those smiles without all the practice. Now Jeremiah, he is quite the opposite. In the Scripture that we read he is called to sow, to plant seeds, to deliver God’s message. But what we find is that over his 40 years of ministry he did not reap a single convert, that wasn’t his job, that wasn’t his responsibility. He had a message to give, he seeds to plant and that was God’s purposes for him. Maybe that is why in chapter 9 he is called the weeping prophet. He continued to obey God but he served his entire life without being able to reap at all. It is as if you practiced your whole life and didn’t win a single event. You would think something is wrong with you. But God tells him, it is not about your or the results that you think you should have, just obey and do what I ask you to do.

Sowing is certainly not better than reaping, but doing the will of God is certainly what we are called to do. That is hard for us to grasp because normally our barometer of whether something is successful or not is numbers. If something is growing then you’re doing what you’re supposed to be doing. That is true if God has called you to be a reaper. But if you are a sower how do you measure spiritual maturity or whether your sowing has hit good ground and will eventually grow? You can’t, and even if you could it isn’t up to you to make it grow.

The advent of mega-churches especially in our community has really highlighted this issue. The traditional mainstream churches, such as our own, could feel a bit resentful because they’re taking all of our members. I remember when I came to a person realization that Jesus was my Savior and more than just a name. I was a senior hi high school. It place on a ski retreat and I went back to my Presbyterian pastor and told him about it and basically asked why he never told me about Jesus.

I wasn’t able to recognize in my immaturity the decade of sermons that I had heard him preach, nor look back at his personal presence in my life that was a rock in times of trouble. I didn’t see the sower that he was and that God had used him to prepare the ground in order for that fruit to be ripe at that retreat. The same is true here in this place of the world where these traditional churches feel as if their fruit is being taken. The question is why can’t we see ourselves as partners with all churches where both sower and reaper are able to celebrate together just as Jesus says is going to happen.

Our common purpose is to bring people to Jesus Christ. So often the enemy is seen as the other denomination and not as evil, not as Satan, not as those who would mock Christ. Our competition is not ever other churches, they are our colleagues, partners in mission, it is the devil. He looks to pluck up and destroy, while churches look to both sow and reap together.

We may be different in how we sow, the medium that we use to preach the Gospel could be different, and it is. You know, I struggle with incorporating videos and other AV material to my sermon because it feels to me like an attempt to reap before I’ve been able to sow. I feel much more comfortable sowing than I do reaping. I think that is true of us as Presbyterians, we don’t have a part in the service where we sing Just As I Am and walk forward to receive Christ. That just isn’t part of who we are and that so reflects and attitude of reaping, that we feel so much better teaching and sowing.

Some are called to sow, and others to reap which is very different from the Olympics because if you don’t sow you will never reap. But ultimately it is about doing what we have been called to do by Almighty God so that people will react just as the Samaritans did and be able to recognize that Jesus Christ is indeed the Savior of the World. That was the end result of this Scripture and it ought to be ours as well.