

The Gleeeful Reaper
Mark 4:26-34
© Stacey Steck
Preached June 14, 2015 at San José, Costa Rica

A scythe is not usually the sign of good news. If you are a half-dressed teenaged character in a horror movie and you see a guy coming at you with one of these, it doesn't matter if you run or not, you are going to lose your head. If you are the unpopular mayor of an agricultural community, and you see people approaching city hall with these in their hands, you will soon be losing at least your political life. And if you are lying in bed some night and you see a shadow on the wall that includes a scythe, a long black robe, and an hourglass, well, it's time to say your final prayers and get ready to meet the infamous Grim Reaper.

Last Sunday, I talked about the personification of God, of the human tendency to ascribe human characteristics to things unseen, to put them more into terms our feeble minds can manage. The Grim Reaper, is of course, a classic image of death personified, of a mysterious guy coming to end our lives with a really sharp farm implement. This particular personification of what many cultures used to call the Angel of Death comes to us from the events of the 14th century, when the Bubonic plague struck Europe and more than 25 million people died in pretty unpleasant ways, turning parts of their bodies gangrenous and black. And that was just the most famous outbreak. Overall, the plague has killed hundreds of millions of people all over the world through the centuries, and, not to scare those of you

with loved ones in New York City, but a research team recently discovered traces of the plague in the subway system. Not to worry though. The virus was quite dead and harmless.

During the years of the plague, to Europe's inhabitants, it seemed very much like death was taking a vicious swipe at their collective lives, much like the swipes they took at their farm products with their scythes at harvest time. The scythe is actually an incredibly effective tool. Someone who really knows how to use one can cut a field of hay faster than a tractor. In Canada and Europe still today, there are competitions to see who can most effectively wield this weapon of mass agricultural destruction, and unless you've seen it, you really can't believe what they can do with those things. And so in the collective fourteenth century imagination, and in the renderings of their artists, that tool became an image of their reality, of people dying faster than they could bury them, of entire communities laid to waste. And with a scythe in the hands of the shadowy, skeletal figure of death that looked a lot like their loved ones, was born the Grim Reaper.

Thanks be to God, the bubonic plague is almost completely wiped out, but the image of the Grim Reaper lives on, even after the 1980s rock band Blue Oyster Cult famously sang, "Don't Fear the Reaper." People of faith still today have in the backs of their minds this image of God sending someone to "harvest their souls," like a divine executioner when their time has come. Even in the church, we use language like, "cut down in the prime of life," or "death has come for him," or

“God took her from us too soon,” phrases that call to mind a sudden, devastating, maybe even divine swipe at our lives. And of course it feels that way, doesn’t it? When death comes swiftly and unexpectedly, it is not the deceased who feels the sharp pain, but the living; the Grim Reaper’s scythe has come not only for our loved one, but in a way, maybe even more so for we who remain behind.

Tonight’s parable of the farmer who scatters seed concludes with that farmer wielding a sickle, another harvesting implement, one with a shorter handle than a scythe, but no less sharp or effective. After the seed has been planted, when the stalk has fully grown, when the head and the grain have come in fully, and finally when the grain is ripe, the time has come, and whoosh, off with its head. The grain falls to the ground and the field is left bare. Why does Jesus share with his disciples this parable? To predict his own death? To let them know he is about to be harvested? To let the disciples know that the angel of death is coming for them too? Here they are growing while learning from Jesus. Their faith is maturing, they are standing taller in their understanding of God, and then what? Suddenly it will all be over in one swing of the divine sickle? Is this a lesson in humility?

Although reminders of our mortality are never a bad idea, I don’t think this is the purpose of the parable. But the parable may be a reminder that the fact of our mortality doesn’t mean we are without purpose. Our purpose, at least as far as the Kingdom of heaven is concerned, is not simply to grow and grow and grow until the Grim Reaper comes for us, but to grow and grow and grow until the Gleeeful

Reaper is ready to use us. Yes, we may still have in mind Death the Grim Reaper after all these years, but we really should be focused on God the Gleeeful Reaper. Jesus may have been harvested from life by the Grim Reaper in the full ripeness of his grain, but more importantly, he was harvested from death by the Gleeeful Reaper for our sakes. In the fullness of time, to use that mysterious Biblical phrase, in the fullness of time, after the seed had been planted, when the stalk had fully grown, when the head and the grain had come in fully, and finally when the grain was ripe, God the Gleeeful Reaper brought life to the world.

“I am the bread of life,” Jesus said. And what makes bread but wheat? Harvested wheat. Wheat cut down in the prime of its life by a sharp farm implement. And then it is ground up, and mixed up, and baked up and served warm and buttered at a table filled with family and friends. “I am the bread of life,” Jesus said. “Whoever comes to me will never be hungry.” Bread for the body, bread for the spirit, bread for the hungry, bread for the world. Wouldn’t all that make God gleeeful?

But the Gleeeful Reaper doesn’t stop with Jesus. No, God is after each one of us with that divine sickle, or scythe, to harvest us, to fulfill our purpose to feed and clothe and comfort and nourish the world, not by our deaths in the physical sense, but by our death to the power of death in our lives. Our lives are seeds planted by that farmer, and we grow and grow and grow, and when we are ready, however and whenever God deems us ready, whoosh, off with our heads. And then we are

gathered up and ground up and mixed up and baked up and served warm and buttered at a table filled with family and friends. In Jesus Christ, God harvests us from death and brings us to life, so that we may bring life to the world.

I hope I have not left you the impression that we are harvested just once for the salvation of our souls. That harvest is hopefully just the first of many such times when God sees that we have grown in such a way, that we have been prepared in such a way, that we are ready to be harvested again, to bring life to the world. These subsequent harvests, these are the ones that coincide with the transitions in our lives, the changes of direction, the twists and turns of our roads. As I look back at my own life, I can see the seasons of growth and the harvests that followed, the times when I was learning, or preparing, or going through difficult times, and the times when change was thrust upon me, or a decision made for me, or a path or direction shown clearly to me. And in each of those transitions, the place I went to next or the next situation in which I found myself was one that I was prepared for, and one in which I was truly able to offer something I could not have offered before, before my stalk was grown and before my grain was ripe. And I can see that the Gleeful Reaper was there with the divine scythe in hand, satisfied with the growth and the harvest. A few times, I felt the sting of the blade, but usually it was so painless I never noticed it until I looked back to see how far I had come.

Friends, the bad news is that the Grim Reaper *is* coming for you. But the good news of the Gospel is that the Gleeful Reaper has already come, and keeps coming again and again. God is coming for you today and everyday with the opportunity to grow and the promise of being harvested. It happened to Jesus, it happened to the disciples who heard this parable, it's happened in the thousands of generations since, and it's happening to you. And here's the thing: you should want God to cut off your head, to harvest you and then grind you up, and mix you up, and bake you up, and serve you up hot and buttered at a table filled with family and friends, because then you will be feeding someone, nourishing someone, allowing someone to express and experience hospitality and generosity. And that is what the Kingdom of God is all about. Amen.