

May 13 – Read 2 Corinthians 9:6-15. “God has the power to provide you with more than enough of every kind of grace” (verse 8). “You will be made rich in every way” (verse 11). The apostle Paul, a roving preacher who owned, it would seem, no real estate, life insurance, or retirement plan, wrote those words! Even to people who lived in the large city of Corinth, he used the language of harvest, of God increasing their crop. He challenged them (and us) to rethink what “rich” and “more than enough” really mean. God sows generously. He asks us to produce a generous harvest. Paul’s specific focus was an offering from Gentile Christians to support poor Jewish Christians in Jerusalem. Yet he kept talking about what God gives us: “everything you need always,” “every kind of grace” and “You will be made rich in every way so that you can be generous in every way.” When (if ever) have you received a gift that “left you speechless,” that words couldn’t fully describe? How would you compare that feeling with God’s gift(s) of which Paul spoke? Paul did not invent the idea that “God loves a cheerful giver.” 2 Chronicles 31:4-10 said that after King Hezekiah’s call to supply the Temple, “the Israelites generously gave the best of their grain, new wine, oil, honey, and all their crops—a tenth of everything, a huge amount.” Why would God want us to give from free, grateful hearts without coercion or pressure? When have you felt the joy of giving freely from a grateful heart of love?

May 14. Read Leviticus 19:9-10, Deuteronomy 24:19-22. Mainly (but not solely) in the Old Testament Scriptures, “we move in a largely rural world of farming, with its attendant sowing and harvesting. . . .they were to leave part of the crops for the poor and the sojourner. Harvest was thus an indicator of the Hebrews’ obedience to the moral obligations of their covenant with God.” Even as Hebrew farmers gathered the crops to sustain themselves and their families, the law told them to remember those who did not have a crop of their own to gather. Sometimes people advise us to be sure we don’t “leave any money on the table.” Most of us today aren’t directly harvesting fields. In your financial dealings, are there times when the principles the law taught the Israelites might suggest you NOT squeeze every cent out of a transaction? In what conditions might these principles change your approach? The little book of Ruth told how Boaz, a well-off farmer, let Ruth, a Moabite migrant, glean in his fields to help her mother-in-law Naomi. This led to their marriage, the start of a family that produced King David, and, centuries later, Jesus (cf. Matthew 1:5-16). When have you seen a seemingly small act of sharing (in resources, time or talent) start good results far greater than the giver expected? (There’s no telling what God may do with even what we see as a small act of generosity.)

May 15. Read Galatians 5:22-25, 2 Peter 1:4-8. To the Galatians, Paul described the positive qualities that come when we let the Holy Spirit bear his fruit in our lives. (Fruit, of course, is what people harvest from vineyards and orchards. And we are God's vineyard.) Although Peter didn't specifically use "fruit" language, he pointed to the way in which our energy and effort work with God's power to transform our inner being to bear the qualities God desires for us. Does the kind of life portrayed in today's readings sound appealing to you, or not? Think through the reasons for your answer. Do you find yourself expressing or acting out love and generosity in ways that were not characteristic of you in the past? Take a personal inventory of how present each of the "fruit of the Spirit" qualities is in your life. Prayerfully ask the Holy Spirit to help you identify one or two of the areas you most need to grow in. Peter said we must "make every effort" to build these positive traits into our life. Scholar N. T. Wright wrote, "Peter is urging his readers to...become more fully human, he says, by building one aspect of Christian character on top of another: faith, virtue, knowledge, self-control, patience, piety, family affection, and finally love. All these take thought; all these take effort. They don't happen by accident." What daily choices are you making to allow God's power to build a noble, fruitful character in you?

May 16. Read Matthew 13:24-30. Jesus' story reminded us that we need to focus on the fruit we are bearing for God to harvest from our lives. When the servants asked to pull out the weeds, the master said, "No, because if you gather the weeds, you'll pull up the wheat along with them." It is not our job to "weed out" others for bearing bad fruit. We couldn't do it accurately. That is God's task; ours is to make sure we bear good fruit come harvest time. What Jesus described did happen in Palestine. There was a slightly poisonous weed (loium temulentum for any botanists among our readers) that, until mature, looked almost exactly like a young wheat plant. It seems that part of Jesus' teaching was that we are far too quick to see people as "good" or "bad" based on very partial knowledge about them. What helps you avoid judging people too quickly based on limited information? Disease, violence or tragic accidents often make us wish God would end that right now!!! Scholar N. T. Wright wrote, "At the heart of the parable of the weeds and the wheat is the note of patience....God didn't and doesn't enjoy the sight of a field with weeds all over the place. Nor does he relish the thought of declaring harvest-time too soon, destroying wheat along with weeds....When today we long for God to...put the world to rights, we must remind ourselves that he has already done so [at Calvary and Easter], and that what we are now awaiting is the full outworking of those events." Is it hard at times for you to be patient with God? Are you thankful God has been patient with you?

May 17. Read Matthew 9:36-38, Jesus worked tirelessly to restore people to physical, emotional and spiritual wholeness. There's no record that he farmed any land—he sought a harvest of transformed people. Like him, Covenant believes the harvest is bigger than we can even imagine. God calls us to devote all we have—our energy, talents and finances—to helping gather that harvest. Jesus pleaded for God to “send out workers into his harvest field.” To what extent do you think “troubled and helpless...sheep without a shepherd” expresses the spiritual state of your neighbors, co-workers, even some people you know in church? Are you willing to become one of the workers Jesus wished for? What abilities and resources has God given you that you can use to help reach troubled, helpless people with the good news of Jesus? Since you have welcomed Jesus and the light he brings to your life, how have you seen God work in unexpected ways in you? Through you in the lives of others you know? Reaching “fields ripe for the harvest” is a major reason our church has four campuses and expects to have more in the future. How can you identify people in your circle of influence who may be particularly receptive to God's love if you share it with them?