

What Goes Around Comes Around
Rev. Vanessa R. Southern
The Unitarian Church in Summit
January 23, 2011

Reading:
“Reap What You Sow” by Marilyn Pfaltz

Once many years ago, I had a very sick friend who continually bemoaned the fact that so many people were helping her and she had no way to pay them back. ... I wrote up my experience by way of explaining how favors are repaid.

My good friend and college classmate, Barbie, came to visit our family when my three children were 3, 6 and 8. As a result of childhood diabetes, she had lost her sight shortly after our graduation, and her visit, on which she arrived by train, was a tribute to her pluck.

At week's end, I took the three children and Barbie to Newark Penn Station for her train to Boston. I sat the three children on the platform bench and sternly warned them not to budge. When the train pulled in, I tried to engage a gruff and uninterested conductor for assistance with the luggage and helping Barbie over the gap. She misstepped, and, although we caught her fall, a huge gash was opened in her leg and she began to bleed profusely.

The stationmaster, highly agitated, rushed over and said, “You had better drive her to the hospital, the ambulances take forever.” I knew that she was having major health issues with medication levels and all the attending complications of diabetes. I was completely overwhelmed with the thought of driving with my three small children and Barbie in her deteriorating condition. I was paralyzed with indecision.

At that moment, a woman who had just put her college-bound son on the train stepped up and introduced herself to me. In a split-second, she somehow established several mutual friends and a trustful connection and said she would watch the children while I went to the hospital. The stationmaster urged, “Go. You need to hurry. I will help watch the children as well.”

In my alarm over Barbie's state and potential for diabetic coma, I hastily agreed, and off we went. It was not until she was safely in the emergency doctor's hands that I panicked about leaving the children and desperately called the stationmaster. "Not to worry, I can see them in the waiting room," he said, "they have just had their second ice cream cone and are having a grand time with their new friend." Amazing Grace!

Fifteen years later, a friend and I had taken her two teenage boys and my youngest to Niagara Falls. They wanted to take the Maid of the Mist boat ride. We walked down the long driveway hill to the embarkation dock. As their boat floated off, there was a horrified gasp from the crowd watching the launch about 50 feet above where we were standing. A man, reaching for a child's toy, tumbled to the cement pavement with a horrible thud just five feet away. He was motionless.

Pandemonium ensued. Quickly an ambulance and several police cars arrived. A woman, clutching three children, began running down the long driveway, screaming hysterically: "That's my husband! That's my husband!" The ambulance crew, blocking her way, said she could not take the children in the ambulance with her. She became even more agitated. Everyone seemed paralyzed by her screams and the wailing of the children.

My whole being was transported through time to that moment at the Newark train station. I knew instantly what I needed to do.

As if in a dream, I stepped forward and announced, "I will take the children to the hospital." "But I don't know you," she sobbed. Calmly, with complete authority, I explained, "We – the children and I – will go in this officer's police car and meet you at the hospital." Astonished but obliging, the police officer piled us into his car, and off we raced to the emergency room. Amazing Grace revisited!

Meditation/Prayer:
"Sowing Beauty" by Vanessa Southern

In the quiet of a space
Carved out from the business and busyness of life,
We still our own racing hearts,
To listen for what murmurs just beneath the noise.
We bring big questions,

Painful struggles,
Uncertainties that bother,
Certainties that constrain,
And the ever-presented and often overlooked blessings of our lives.
May we trust that what we do and who we are in the world matters.
May we know that our decision may not change the tilt of the planet
But will lean our corner of it more gently toward order and kindness and things of justice.
May we get the domino effect of good started with one gentle push,
And all the big questions, painful struggles, uncertainties that bother and certainties that constrain die down,
With the certainty of having sown good and good things where our own feet have trod;
Leaving a meadow in our wake,
And beauty behind us.
Amen.

Sermon:
“What Goes Around”

When I told Marilyn I was preaching a sermon on “What Goes Around Comes Around,” she said she had a story to share. Her story fit perfectly into the larger conversation of today’s sermon – the question of giving and receiving and how that cycle works, for real, in the world. What is funny is that she named her story “Reap What You Sow.” So Marilyn takes us right to the biblical references.

The Hebrew and Christian Scriptures, as you might imagine, were being written by and for an agrarian populace, and so are filled with organic and agrarian references. No surprise, then, that the whole cycle of reaping and sowing as a metaphor is used more than 80 times. The one we probably all grew up hearing, whether we knew it was biblical or not, was the old “You reap what you sow,” or, as Paul writes in the letter to Galatians to a people who clearly feared that justice can be cheated: “Do not be deceived; God is not mocked, for you reap whatever you sow” (Galatians 6:7).

Comforting to hear, perhaps – or, depending on what you’ve done, perhaps terrifying – but not worth losing too much sleep over either way, because we know from experience that the statement isn’t entirely true – at least not on *Earth*. It would certainly make the world fairer if reaping always followed sowing in a rule

of the universe that bound all things the way gravity or momentum does, but it doesn't.

Our lives have witnessed countless counter-examples to this law the Bible offers up. We have seen good people to whom much bad happens. And we have seen bad people whose lives seemed heaped with luck and blessings. Maybe we even know a few examples up close, like the backbiting colleague whom a member here described to me not long ago – a woman who cut corners and passed off her underlings' work as her own and still got all the promotions and top bonuses year after year.

And on the other side, I know three different women, all solid, dependable women with huge hearts, who all had children born to or adopted into their families who came into this world with significant mental illness. For these women, all the love and carefully sought-out professional intervention could not spare them the immense pain of a child whose life is complicated, hurtful to others, and often out of control.

So sowing and reaping don't always follow in a neat pattern, despite what the Bible seems to imply. However, when that law holds, when the good are rewarded and the misbehaving, self-centered, lazy and obnoxious folks get their comeuppance, in some natural cycle like spring following winter, it can feel good, can't it?

I know a man whose brother, the oldest, crashed the cars he was given, racked up debts at college and committed a whole host of errors in judgment that meant that the boys in the family who followed got put on austerity budgets and short leashes, though they deserved better. So, when that elder brother had a son of his own, and for a time that son was a truckload of trouble, no one was secretly more pleased than those two brothers. "The apple doesn't fall far from the tree," they'd say with a smile. "The chickens have come home to roost." What goes around comes around.

Well, I started thinking this summer about the idea of what we sow and how it comes back to us. I thought about all the ways it does come true and how gorgeous it is to be in touch with those stories and those moments in human history. And I started thinking about it in very personal terms.

I started thinking about it when my uncle got sick. First, you should know that I didn't really know this uncle until I moved to New York City, which I did

just after turning 8 years old. My mother had a brother who lived in upstate New York and ran a business on Cayuga Lake – a big restaurant and inn – but living on the West Coast up until then, we had little interaction with him. All I knew was that my first summer in New York, the summer of my 9th year, I was sent off to spend a few weeks with this uncle and my aunt and my two then very small cousins.

I found out *this* summer, when I thanked my uncle for opening his life to me, that the reason I went up to visit was that he had come to visit my mom and dad in their classic New York railroad apartment right after they moved. He saw them struggling to launch a new life in a new city and he thought, “I need to help my sister out.” And in 1976 or ‘77, New York was no great place for a kid, so he made the only offer he could. I was thrilled to get out of the concrete city in July and August and an apartment that had no air conditioning, and so it began.

That first summer launched a life of summers. Before long I was entrenched in my Ithaca family, leaving New York the day after school ended and returning the day before school began again in September. I worked in their family restaurant when I was old enough, acquired two cousins close enough to stand in for sisters, swam in the lake, found a whole new world of beauty and fun that became sacred territory for me.

My uncle and his wife were exceedingly generous to open their lives to me. Certainly at the beginning, they did so with no thought of it ever benefiting them. If anything, welcoming another child into their busy life, with two small children and a huge family business to run, during its high season, was only an act of generosity, pure and simple.

Fast-forward 33 years. My aunt, who had deeply shaped me, died from breast cancer two years ago, and as of June, my uncle was struggling with an aggressive brain tumor. His older daughter just had a baby. And it is *my* family, my mom and dad, who visit my uncle almost daily, and who will baby-sit that baby so my cousin and her husband can have date night, and it is that baby who we all hope will become like a sister to my daughter. That is *our* plan, at least.

I have to imagine that for my uncle, lying in the hospice bed with long, quiet hours to think, one comfort must be that he leaves his daughters in hands ready to catch them. And, of course, such hands are ready all because he made a huge and generous offer three decades earlier, at an inconvenient time, with no thought of

how it might, if ever, benefit him. It made me think how often what goes around does come around, and in ways that completely surprise us.

A member here told me once of her best friend's parents. My father, that best friend told me when I talked to her, admits he has what he calls "an empty bed complex." What that means is, if his big house has an empty bed and someone is in need of it, it is theirs for the taking. "We added up once, and during their lives they have welcomed in over 30 people to stay with them – men and women and *whole families* who have spent from one month to many years living in that house with them."

Once, years ago, they took in a young man whose own parents had essentially disowned him (and he them). In time, that young man grew up to be a cardiac nurse. Now he drives the elderly couple to their doctors' appointments, where he can be a pair of expert ears. And, the daughter said, he is *just one* of a whole community of people who look out for this couple, as they looked out for anyone in need for their entire lives.

What goes around comes around. Not perfectly, but appropriately, and more often than not.

It does not, however, always come right back to us. Sometimes we put something out into the world that gets a chain reaction started that we may never recognize as something we launched. Sometimes the cycle of sowing and reaping is more like some great chain of anonymous grace.

A perfect example is Marilyn's story and that woman who spent two hours in the Newark train station, keeping three small children busy while Marilyn rushed her bleeding friend to the emergency room. Once she realized what she had done, leaving her kids with a stranger, Marilyn got nervous. In those two hours, she would call the stationmaster five times. "They're having a ball," he'd tell her.

The woman who doled out ice cream in the train station would never see or know the woman who, years later, would cry out at Niagara Falls when her husband landed lifeless on a rock ledge after a fall. The woman from the train station would never see the scene that played out when a well-dressed and respectable woman stepped forward into this mayhem with a strange composure and took the hands of those three children, knowing just what to do because, long ago, another woman had shown her what caring perfectly for someone in just such circumstances might look like.

We may never see the harvest of our own good deeds, or even our own bad deeds, but we can trust that seeds planted in the world almost always bear their fruit somewhere.

The most dramatic story of this I have heard lately is the one told in the documentary called “A Small Act.” The film tells the story of Chris Mburu. Harvard-educated, Mburu began his life a poor boy in rural Kenya. What launched him, however, was the support of a Swedish teacher named Hilde Back, who, answering some advertisement, sent \$15 a month to educate a child in Kenya and was matched with Chris.

Years later, Mburu noticed how families in his home village still could not afford to finance their children’s education. Determined to pay the gift he had been given forward, he started an education fund for that purpose. He named it the Hilde Back Education Fund after his sponsor and in honor of her. Right there alone is a huge and perfect circle of sowing and reaping, yes?

But it doesn’t stop there.

Mburu also decided to find Ms. Back and thank her for what she made possible in his life. He tracked her down through the Swedish embassy and found her. A charming and humble woman, they became friends, and he heard her story, which was quite remarkable. Hilde, a Jew, had been born in Germany and persecuted by the Nazis, who, among other things, denied her the right to an education. Eventually, she got a visa and left Germany, but had to leave behind her parents, who could not get visas – and whom she would never see again. They would become victims of the Holocaust.

Imagine, then, for her to hear not just how her gift of education had multiplied – this education she understood so well the pain of being denied. Imagine the healing there, but more so imagine her reaction to hearing about what the boy she had educated now does for a living as a man. Because, you see, Chris Mburu is right now a highly respected human rights advocate for the United Nations. The work he does day in and day out is work to end violence and abuse, and work to prevent genocide – *the kind of violence, abuse and genocide that tore Hilde’s own life apart 60 years before!*

What goes around comes around, in strange and wonderful ways. More often, I think, than we know. And maybe and most often in ways we will never

see or hear about, or recognize as our handiwork when it moves across our own lives, having taken on a life of its own. It isn't a perfect law of nature, like gravity or momentum, but it has a pull and a force of its own.

We live, wrote Alfred North Whitehead, "by the law of expenditure." Meaning it isn't important what comes to us, but what comes out of us. Yet the truth is, put out love (or justice or honesty or courage or compassion) and you have a better chance of getting it back. If for no other reason than there will be, because of your acts, more love circulating in the world to be had.

So we plant the seeds because it is better to live that way, giving away what has been given to us with a lavish hand. But we also do so because we know some of those seeds will take root, offer shade, drop fruit by the bushel, be there for everyone who follows as a silent tribute to our lives.

It isn't a perfect law, but a darn good moral one – one to live by – a new version of the Golden Rule, I submit: Sow what you wish to reap. Sow though you may not be there when the harvest comes in. Sow and leave the rest to the magic and momentum of the world.

Amen.