The sermon this morning might better be titled “The Law of the Harvest.” As it could connect with the Thanksgiving theme of the holiday weekend. But it is the law I want to talk about today, the law of the harvest that one reads in Paul’s words in his letter to the Galatians, “whatsoever a man sows, that shall he also reap.” What we sow, we reap. If we sow tares or weeds, we reap tares and weeds. If we sow bad seed, we cannot expect good results. As Jesus said, we cannot get grapes from thistles or figs from thorns. There is a basic law of the harvest that every farmer, every gardener knows, “whatsoever a man sows, that shall he also reap.”

This verse in Paul’s letter has a fundamental meaning that far transcends the agricultural application. It suggests a cosmic principle that is embodied in the laws of nature and in the moral order of human history as well. There is a kind of cosmic justice, a law of moral compensation that is found in the inexorable laws of nature as well. For example, we cannot get out of a transaction more than what we put into it. [We can change energy but not augment it in the process - that is why we cannot create a perpetual motion machine.] There is a kind of justice in all transactions where energy is transformed or chemical changes take place. That is why their descriptions or explanations take the form of equations.

There is an intuitive sense of this cosmic justice in our reactions to weather patterns. We are convinced that there must be a fair balance of warm and cold over the seasons. That is why you hear people say in response to the beautiful weather we’ve been having this past week: We’ll pay for this later. I prefer to think the beautiful fall weather is part repayment for the past two winters we have had which have been unjustly cold and snowy even by Michigan standards. The point is, though, however we count, we expect a kind of fair balance, a cosmic justice. Just as we expect from “the law of averages” an ultimate balance.

The law of the harvest is simply a special application of cosmic justice. And in its broader implications as Paul clearly intends it, it means we cannot expect good ends from bad means; we cannot sow unregenerate appetites and desires and reap the spiritual harvest of happiness and serenity, peace and joy. In the culture of the soil men are never so stupid as to expect grapes from thorns or figs from thistles. Tares yield tares. But in the culture of the soul we have yet to learn that selfishness cannot yield fellowship, that enmity cannot bring peace, that manipulation of others cannot bring cooperation or acts of spite or hate generate mutual confidence and love. We reap the consequences of our actions. God is not mocked. The Greek word here is a vivid one; it means literally we cannot “turn up our nose” - we would say, we cannot thumb our nose - at God. There is a law of moral compensation, a moral law of the harvest, as fixed and fundamental as the law of gravity. We cannot break it; we flout it at our peril. If we try to break it, just as if we try to break the law of gravity, we will find that we break ourselves against it.

But, surely, one might object: there is a difference between a natural law and the moral law. One can verify experimentally natural law. But who is to say what a moral law is? How are we to take
seriously in the 20th century moral precepts developed in a simple agrarian society so many centuries ago? Besides all moral principles are relative to a society, or a group, or a country or an era. As Shakespeare said, “Nothing’s either right or wrong, but thinking makes it so.” Or as Kipling put it, “There are nine and sixty ways of conducting tribal lays, and every single one of them is right.” Kipling was the one who taught us that “East is east and west is west, and never the twain shall meet.” The message is clear: there are no universal moral precepts or laws.

And contemporary rhetoric sounds a similar note. There is a tendency to say why should another impose his value system on me, as if moral values were a kind of personal option or taste or right - like one’s choice of an ice cream flavor. The implication is that morality is a personal choice of what one who likes - when the fact is that morality relates to interpersonal relationships and must be determined on a basis larger than one’s personal wishes.

But the objections still are well made. That there is no evidence of a universal moral law, that facts are different from values, that we can reach agreement on the truth of facts but are left with values as simply a matter of taste, relative to the time, the society, the situation.

One response to the objection is to cite the authority of Scripture. In a sense, I began by doing this with my text from the Christian scripture, “As a man soweth, that shall he also reap.” What I would like to urge, however, is that so pervasive and persuasive is this moral truth, that the scriptures of all the great world religions have recognized it in one way or another. Common agreement may not constitute proof, but at least it refutes the notion that the moral law is restricted to a minority religious sect that emerged long ago - and suggests that the universal agreement approaches a kind of intuitive awareness of a cosmic law of moral justice.

There is the verse from Judaism read in the Scripture lesson. “Behold, ye have sinned against the Lord, and be sure your sin will find you out.” This verse is often misread. It does not say - Be sure your sin will be found out. It does say, Be sure your sin will find it you out. It will leave its mark upon you. The consequences of sin cannot be avoided. They may be hidden, they may not be found out. But they’ll find you out.

The oldest scriptures are in Hinduism. And from the Hindu Upansishads we read the famous law of karma, the most ancient expression of the cosmic moral law, “As is a person’s desires, so is his will; and as his will, so is his deed; and whatever deed he does, that will he reap.” In other words, deeds determine destiny; good deeds, good destiny; bad deeds, bad destiny. Not that there is any judge handing out rewards and punishments. This is simply the way it is. And with the Hindu belief in reincarnation one can account for one’s poor situation by saying one must have sinned dreadfully in one’s former life to be reborn like this. If one persists in living like a beast or a pig, Hindu logic suggests you may be reborn as such. Jainism, another religion of India, holds the same doctrine. “Every deed will bear its fruit to men.” Misery arises from wicked deeds. In this life and the next people cannot escape the effects of their own actions.

Buddhism has a similar teaching, that creatures follow the destiny of their deeds. “Think not lightly of evil, it will not befall me” we read in their scriptures. “Little by little, as drop by drop
the pitcher is filled, so little by little one by doing evil becomes evil.” Nor should one think lightly of good, for good consequences follow good acts as the furrow follows the plow.

Confucianism teaches “Good and evil do not wrongfully befall men, but heaven sends down misery or happiness according to their conduct.” And Taoism, another ancient Chinese religion, teaches “The reward of good and evil follows as the shadow follows an object.”

The Koran, the Muslim Bible, proclaims, “Every soul shall be recompensed for that which it has earned, and they shall not be wronged.” And the Baha’i Faith, a modern experiment in a universal religion born in Persia in the last century teaches - “Naught is reaped but what is sown.”

No, God is not mocked: whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap. Ye have sinned against the Lord, and be sure your sin will find you out. This is the way it is. There are moral forces of justice that rule individual and world history just as there are cosmic forces of justice that represent the order of nature.

And the nature of these moral forces, this spirit that might be called the law of the harvest is not so hard to discover in spite of our relativistic age. It might be stated in this way: the ends we seek to achieve partake of the quality of the means by which we seek to achieve them. If we seek reconciliation, peace, harmony, but we try to achieve this by conflict, war, and stirring up dissension, we will fail. As ye sow, so shall ye reap. If we wish good, we must reflect the good in our actions. If we wish peace, good will, helpfulness in others, we must reflect peace, goodwill and helpfulness in our own actions. Or expressed negatively - we cannot cheat or be dishonest in a business transaction - in human relationships or in a marriage and expect the fruits of credit, confidence or love.

This suggests a second moral principle that incidentally can be found in all the world’s religions - that is the “Golden Rule” - “all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them.” What one wishes as a reward, as a harvest for one’s labors in the vineyard of the Lord, he must express in the quality of his life in relation to others.

It is by loving others that love is received. It is by helping others that one is helped. It is by understanding others that one is understood. And it is by forgiving others that one is himself forgiven. This is the way we bear one another’s burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ, as Paul said.

Paul puts the law of the harvest of this way: he who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption and he who sows to the spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life. Sewing and reaping go together. To sow to one’s own flesh means to be concerned with one’s own desires and needs. And who knows how to put a ceiling on his personal desires and needs? What happens is that one is enslaved, victimized by the demands of the self to achieve happiness. But he who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life. He who commits himself to the Spirit of Christ, sowing faith, hope, and love, will reap the sure harvest of joy and peace in the knowledge that he is reflecting the creative love of God.
Therefore let us not grow weary in well-doing, for in due season we shall reap, if we do not lose heart, says Paul. In so doing, we do the work of God.

East is East and West is West and never the twain shall meet - but the lines go on - “til earth and sky stand presently at God’s great judgment seat.” There is a law that unites East and West, the law of the harvest. And this cosmic moral law is not just judgment - but promise of a world of peace where all men will unite in expressing the law of love -

Therefore let us not be not weary in well-doing - for in due season we shall reap - if we do not lose heart - for this is the law of the harvest - the universal, cosmic, moral law.

Pastoral Prayer

Oh God of love - teach us the higher meaning of Thy creative love. So often we think of Thee as the loving father, as if it is Thy business to love us, as if somehow it is our right to receive Thy love. It is as if Thou art a doting parent who fondly approves everything we do.

Teach us the higher meaning of love - that creative spirit which affirms and inspires the highest and the best that is within us. May we be so filled with the vision of Thy perfection, that we will aspire to all things whatsoever that are lofty and noble and lovely and of good to report. Above all teach us to follow the example of Thy Son, Jesus Christ, Who gave of Himself that others might live in the life eternal.

Teach us, we pray, that Thou dost require something of us, to respond to Thy love. May we sow seeds of understanding, forgiveness, charity and acceptance. May we choke out the weeds of malice, envy, judgment, rebuke, and self justification in our souls. Above all may we be sensitive to the needs and concerns of others. If we become annoyed with another, may we stop to consider what problems, burdens, he may be carrying to make him behave as he does. If our brother offends us, let us remember first that he is our brother, not that he has offended us, and then may we bear the offense with forbearance.

O God, teach us to be sensitive to the needs of others and so reflect the love of Christ. May we remember those who are lonely, frightened, in physical pain, in the suffering of remorse. May they and we feel the assurance of Thy love to be present when lonely, to dispel the specters of fear when frightened, to comfort us in pain, to point the way to a better tomorrow when we feel remorse.

We would remember all those in trouble, especially in these days our fellow Americans held hostage in a hostile land. Be Thou their stay and deliverer, we pray. And may we take up the task of resisting evil with a sense of courage. May we reflect in our own lives the law of the harvest - sowing in the spirit of faith, hope, and the love - and reaping a sense of fellowship with Thee, and Thy Son.