

2025 05 18 – Pistang Bukid (Rural Life Sunday)

Scripture: Mark 4:1-9 (*The Inclusive Bible*)
Psalm 148

First I want to thank Jackie for her presentation on Pistang Bukid. When Jackie and I first talked about ideas for Asian Heritage Month, I asked her if there were any special celebrations in the Philippines in the spring. When I asked the question, I hadn't really thought about the differences in our climates. The fact that in the month of May, while the people of the Philippines are expressing thanksgiving for their harvest, we are just completing the seeding of our crops.

But both of these activities, planting and harvest, give us reason to celebrate. Here in North America, and in The United Church of Canada, in particular, we also recognize Rural Life Sunday. It is traditionally the sixth Sunday of the Season of Easter. On our United Church website, it says Rural Life Sunday "calls the church to celebrate its heritage, to affirm worldwide the people and communities who work with and on the land by raising food and fiber, and to recognize the ongoing crisis occurring in rural areas of [Canada] and the world today." <https://united-church.ca/worship-special-days/rural-life-sunday>

Here in Swift Current, we have the privilege of living in a rural area of our country. Many of us grew up on farms and ranches, some of us are still farming or have retired from a lifetime of farming. This celebration of rural life is therefore near and dear to our hearts. We know firsthand the importance of the land and the bounty that it produces.

We know that there is no better feeling than the joy of having the yearly crop harvested and safely stored in barns, silos, grain bins, elevators and terminals. But close to that feeling is the satisfaction of knowing that all our fields have been planted and the seed has been placed carefully in the ground. I think that's true whether you are a farmer with thousands of acres or a home gardener with a small plot in your backyard.

Our gospel reading today is also about seeds and sowing. Jesus is sharing one of his parables with a huge crowd who have gathered beside the Sea of Galilee. As always, Jesus uses a metaphor that the crowd will recognize from their daily living. He asks them to imagine a sower going out to sow, scattering the seed widely. So widely that some of it falls on the edge of the path, some on rocky ground, some in thorns and, the remainder, in rich soil.

This way of sowing seed is, of course, no longer a familiar picture. No one plants like that anymore. Growing up on a farm in Ontario, I got used to seeing fields filled with straight, unending rows of corn, beans and oats. But it wasn't until I arrived on the prairies that I really appreciated the wonder of a no till air drill and the accuracy of GPS- driven equipment. This incredible technology allows for precision planting where each seed is placed exactly where you want it to be. This type of planting has resulted in yields like farmers have never seen before.

But even with all this technology, not every seed will yield a bumper crop. Every farmer knows that soil conditions, the amount and type of crop residue, the right kind of fertilizer and pesticide will all effect the ability of the seed to germinate, to

grow and to produce. And, of course, there are all the other factors, the ones that the farmer has no control over: the sun, rain, wind and hail.

Jesus explained that the seeds that fell in soil that was not ideal would struggle to survive and would produce little or no crop. This parable can be interpreted in many different ways. Often it is used as a way of understanding the spreading of the Good News, the message of God's love. In this interpretation, Jesus is explaining that sometimes the Good News falls on deaf ears. More recently scholars have argued that this parable is a subversive message talking about the abuses that the peasant farmers of Galilee experienced in Jesus' time: high Roman taxes, temple duties and the confiscation of their most productive land.

But on this Rural Life Sunday, I would like to take this parable at face value and focus on the act of farming itself and the importance of caring for the seed and for the land that we have been given.

In today's psalm, Psalm 148, we praised God for all of creation, for its amazing diversity and its abundant life. All parts of creation are important, even those areas that may seem "rocky" or "infested with thorns" when first visited. As we all know, when John Palliser travelled through this part of the country in the mid-1800's he concluded that Southern Saskatchewan was not suitable for the planting of crops. As stewards of this wonderful earth, it is our job to consider each part of creation and recognize its own individual worth.

To that end, I want to celebrate the importance of agricultural research and experimental farms. It's fascinating to note that even the 1800's there were already experimental farms in Canada: a dairy farm near Winnipeg, and another farm near Ottawa. In 1920 the research station here in Swift Current was established. It is through the work done at these experimental farms that scientists have discovered how to grow crops in drought-afflicted areas like the prairies. It is up to us to ensure that their work continues to evolve, so that we may find ways to farm that are even safer and better adapted to our prairie landscape.

I also want to celebrate the work of the Nature Conservancy of Canada, a non-profit organization who are working with local farmers, Indigenous people and other organizations to save ecologically important areas and to provide habitat for endangered species. Celebrating rural life includes not only celebrating agriculture, but also the diversity and the beauty of the untouched areas in God's creation.

And finally I do want to celebrate all the farmers and the ranchers and all the people who work in industries that support the production of food and fiber. Let us give thanks to those who feed the world, who care for the earth, and who provide a key part of the engine that keeps rural cities like Swift Current alive and well.

Today we celebrate not only the rural life that exists in our own country but also around the world and we give thanks for the crops that are being planted and harvested across our planet.

May it be so. Amen.

And now we have the privilege of listening as Harold sings a traditional song from the Philippines. It is called a Kundiman. It is a type of love song that has existed since the early 19th century. Written in the Tagalog language, these folksongs were patriotic songs disguised as love songs. Filipinos, in their long struggle against an oppressive Spanish regime, saw it as a tool to unite Filipino revolutionaries. This particular Kundiman was written for the church and is actually a song about God's unconditional and everlasting love for us.