

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The Seventh Sunday after Pentecost
July 3, 2016

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Throughout the Old Testament Almighty God is often described as a detached and almost impersonal judge. In our lifetimes the role and work of a judge has evolved from something of a lofty figure sitting on an elevated bench and committed only to the application of the law and its penalties. In recent decades judges have become more involved in what we call “creative sentencing.” Rehabilitation is seen as the end goal.

Our Lord Jesus broke up the prevalent Old Testament concept of God as a formal and formidable judge. Jesus portrayed His Father as Someone Who is involved, committed, and watchful. The father in the parable of the prodigal son certainly fits that description. Jesus says God is like this.

Today’s gospel gives us the substance of the pep talk the Lord gave the seventy disciples being sent out on a missionary journey. We do know anything at all about these people. But in this talk Our Lord gave the impression Almighty God is like a farmer. Jesus says it is okay to think of God this way. The farmer’s great concern is that although the harvest has great potential, the crop is ready and must be gathered quickly. It can only be gathered quickly if there are enough laborers willing to work hard and fast. So the farmer recruits the help of those who profess loyalty to him and to the task.

God Incarnate has given permission to think of Our Heavenly Father in terms of a farmer. In that way we can begin to understand a few things about God and His work. A farm, for instance, easily represents in microcosm the world in its variations. Even before human intervention, the farmland is an ecological system with rich soil, thin soil, rocky hillsides, a river or stream, areas of thick woods, several types and directions of runoff, and prevalent wind conditions at different seasons. The good farmer commits himself to being the guardian and director of this world. He decides what land to clear, how to match crops with soil types, water and sunshine. He decides when to plant and when *not* to plant. He rejuvenates tired soil by letting fields lie fallow, and always keeps an eye on the weather. He also knows how to maintain and repair his farm machinery, keeping his tractors and tools in good condition.

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In describing God as a farmer, Our Lord is suggesting that farming activity can be applied as an analogy to the Kingdom of God and its relation to souls. God is repeatedly planting, harvesting, rehabilitating, and salvaging, souls, and working to keep them in good condition. And He rises early each day because there is much to do. In all of this Jesus presents a vastly different portrait of Almighty God than the Old Testament concept of a judge.

The Lord's directions also involve the recruited laborers in a *far more intimate way* than the conventional "I hire-you work-I pay" transaction. You do not have to travel to third world countries to see pickup trucks stops at street corners and pick up a few men as the employer has daily need. Early on weekday mornings you can see that happen in Brighton or Allston. The laborers' names may or may not be written on a list of those available for hire, but it is always on a "don't call me, I'll call you basis." It is all illegal, of course, but there it is. No Green Cards, withholding for taxes or Social Security, and no major medical.

But see how different is the work-relationship offered by the Lord Jesus. When the seventy return and rejoice with their Master, Jesus gives thanks that their names are found written in the Book of Life. It is not results and success which define the spiritual life of a Christian disciples but what these souls *are* by adoption and grace. The chief end is not to live a good and productive life, although that is usually the means to the end. But the chief end is to be *approved of God*.

Jesus says, "Rejoice not that the spirits are subject unto you, but rejoice that your names are written in Heaven." Why? Our redemption and our servant ministry are *a seamless garment*. The saving of our souls by means of the sacrifice of Christ is what the coming of Christ is about. But those who have been redeemed do not hoard salvation as if it were a commodity placed on a shelf so we can get on with business as usual! Christians are those who trust God with their lives, as the seventy did, in servant ministry, knowing that they are acceptable to Him.