In the name of the Father and of the ✞ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Today’s Prayer of the Day speaks of Christian witness. The Prayer starts off this way:

God, our maker and redeemer, you have made us a new company of priests to bear witness to the Gospel. (my emphasis)

So, my sermon this morning is about these things, about something that might turn out to be crucial — even life-changing, life-saving — in the lives of our neighbors: that we should try to introduce them to Jesus. My sermon text comes from our Gospel Lesson. It is about the farmer who scatters seed on the ground:

[Jesus] also said, “The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. (Mark 4:26-27, NRSV)

Many a farmer does this: the farmer scatters the seed on the ground, he or she sleeps and rises night and day, and the seed sprouts and grows. Dawn comes, when many of us are still asleep in our beds, and there stands the farmer looking out upon the fields, hoping, praying, and admiring the mysteries of God’s ways as the seed sprouts and grows. The welfare of his family, the welfare of her family, depends upon the growing of those crops. If the harvest is good, the farmer is grateful for the ability to take care of his family. But there is often another kind of gratitude underlying the work of the farmer. He is grateful not only for the ability to take care his family, but he is also grateful simply for the miracle of life – the way springtime comes and the little plants begin to grow again—he knows not how, she knows not how. The green heads of the wheat begin to break the ground in their neat rows, sometimes stretching in their tidy parallels as far as the eye can see. Breadbaskets across the land, across the world, depend upon the harvest. And so the seed sprouts and grows, the farmer knows not how, but is grateful for it all.

The farmer, I say, beholds the growing crops, is grateful for the growth, and knows not how it all happens. But that is no excuse for being a lazy farmer. The life of the farmer depends upon God’s gift of growth, but that
does not mean the farmer should sit back and relax. The grace of God that so often produces a harvest should not tempt the farmer into being a careless or lazy worker.

I knew a farmer once, now of blessed memory, who loved his farm. Everything he did he did with care and a kind of quiet joy. His barn was tidy, his animals were well cared for, his tools were all in their places, the lawn around the farm house was mowed, the farm machinery was well oiled and ready to go. The years slipped by and the farmer grew old. He developed heart troubles and went on tending the farm for a good while, but at last he had to give it up. He sold the farm and moved into an assisted living place somewhere. I heard that his daughter never took him back to visit the farm, because she had noted about the new farmer that he was neglectful and things were running downhill, and she did not want her father to see that because it would break his heart.

Our Lord’s parable of the seed growing in the fields is a parable of hope and confidence. Jesus compares the coming of God’s kingdom to the farm, where the farmer sows the seed and God brings the harvest. There are mysteries in the growth of the young plants, but by God’s grace, the harvest comes and the breadbaskets are full. Still, the farmer should not neglect to do his work, to do her work. The farmer should not be lazy, figuring that the harvest will come in any case. Likewise, you and I should not be lazy in speaking up for Jesus, figuring that his kingdom will come in any case. His kingdom will indeed come, but we, above all things, should want to hear Jesus say the good words to us:

Well done, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a little, I will set you over much; enter into the joy of your master. (Matthew 25:21, RSV)

There is a lot of work that needs to be done in a church, and a beautiful number of you know and do that work. On Sunday mornings we are happy to see our ushers, presenters, lectors, assisting ministers and communion assistants. And behind the scenes, all kinds of work is quietly done so that when the liturgy begins, you will have a chance to worship with quiet and undistracted minds. For example, our purificators—the white napkins I use with the chalice—are washed, starched, and ironed. They looked like little works of art to me. Someone has been scattering seeds in the soil. Someone has been a good farmer for the Lord. Someone else posts the hymn numbers on our hymn boards. A fellow clergy once told me that it is quaint that we even have hymn boards. But I do not care if our hymn boards are old-fashioned. I like ‘em. I think they are useful. And someone has been a good farmer for the Lord that the hymn numbers are in place Sunday by Sunday.
Our Altar Guild, so very dear to me, tends to the sacred vessels and vestments and paraments. They do their work quietly and with reverence.

Vicar Caleb sits at the Pastor’s Booth and does good farming for the Lord. People stop by and talk with him about the things on their heart. He listens and answers with Christian integrity. If I sit at the booth, people come up to me with a disappointed look on their face and say, “Where is the young one!? Caleb is a good farmer for the Lord.

Aristides washes down our sidewalks, tidies up the litter, vacuums this red carpet to within an inch of its life.

Our Sunday School teachers prepare their lesson plans and do amazing work organizing Vacation Bible School. They are not paid to do this. They are simply good and earnest farmers for Christ.

Honest and accurate people count the money, record and deposit it, pay the bills, give reports to our Trustees and Church Council. Good farmers, every one of them!

This morning's parable about the seed growing in the field - the farmer knows not how - is a matching parable to the saying of Jesus about the harvest being plentiful, but the laborers are few (Matthew 9:37, RSV). We do not want that! Jesus does not deserve that—that there is a whole world of people waiting to hear the Gospel, but the laborers are few. Let us labor on, in the ways natural for us. Let us pray at the restaurant, wear the ashes on Ash Wednesday, make the sign of the cross in public when it seems right. Let us be available to talk with people when they seem blue. Let us speak of Jesus when the Spirit is leading us to do so.

Today is Father’s Day, and so I say, “Happy Father’s Day to you all!” Many of us had good fathers who passed on Christian faith to us. Let us try to be good fathers to the world, doing what we can to share our faith with our children and with anyone willing to listen. Let us labor on, so that when the Son of Man returns, he will find faith on earth (Luke 18:8).

Recently, I have been reading a novel by Wendell Berry called The Memory of Old Jack (1974). I do not understand how I could have lived to such an old age and knew nothing about such a fine writer until just recently. My friend Pastor Jonathan Jenkins down in central Pennsylvania recommended Wendell Berry to me. Vicar Caleb tells me that one of his favorite novels is by Berry—a novel called Jayber Crow.

At the start of the novel I am reading, old Jack is standing on the porch of the hotel in the fictional town of Port William, Kentucky. Jack lives in that hotel nowadays, when he is very old, though for most of his life, he was a farmer. The novel is set in 1952. Old Jack is the last link with the Civil War, he is that old. In this opening scene, Jack is standing on the porch of the hotel, leaning on his cane. He has been standing there since before dawn. He is still. From a distance he looks like the monument of some historic personage. The thing about old Jack is that he is lost in memory. Folks in town worry about
that. His life has become so internal, so dwelling in bygone times, that they worry whether he will be able to return. They wonder whether he will be able to regain his feel for ordinary life, whether he will stir himself again and go off to the town store to stand around the stove there and chat with other people in town.

But old Jack’s memories are rich and wonderful, and many of them have to do with the farm. Jack has always loved the farm and the land. He loves the animals, he loves the crops, he loves working on the leather for the harnesses for his mules, and he loves his neighbors. He has good and strong memory of neighbors who lived and died years ago. He retains them in his memory.

It has been a good life, for old Jack. It was a hard life in certain ways, but it was a good life. And much of the goodness of that life is being able to look back on work well done.

Someday, when our story is all done, we will look back on our lives, and it might well be that we will feel best about the times when we tried to pick people up by telling them of Jesus. Seasons of drought can come. There can be such a thing as a drought of God’s Word in the land. But you and I have some say about that. So, let us pick up the hoe, speak up for Jesus, and try to give others some encouragement and guidance in life. God’s Kingdom is on its way. Nothing in all creation can stop that Kingdom—not even sin, death, or the devil. But we want the Kingdom to come to us and to our neighbors even now—even now, before the great and awesome day of the Lord. We do not want ourselves or our neighbors to have to struggle onwards without Jesus in their lives. So, let us labor on. Let us tend the farm of faith on earth. Let us be good farmers of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.