

Plymouth Unitarians: Sunday 25th September

Reaping What We Sow – Harvest Festival

Led by Poppy Buttons

Music @ start/pre-service = Aiji Alsina *Collecting Memories* (2:47)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mr68P3YcrHw>

“Every fact and process in Nature contains a moral lesson for the wise man. There is no law in the world which is not to be found operating with the same mathematical certainty in the mind of man and in human life. All the parables of Jesus are illustrative of this truth, and are drawn from the simple facts of nature. There is a process of seed-sowing in the mind and life, a spiritual sowing which leads of a harvest according to the kind of seed sown.”

Good morning, hello and welcome! I am delighted to be here today and even more delighted to be joined by your presence whether online or in person here at church.

Let me start by saying how welcome you are here – however you are here. Whether you come with a heavy heart or are brimming with joy However you are feeling at this time of changes – welcome. if this is your first, second or 102nd time attending – I am so pleased you are here.

Today’s service is entitled *Reaping what we sow* it is our Harvest Festival service and a celebration of nature and seed-sowing.

To honour this time together in worship let us light our chalice. Our chalice flame is a symbol of our free religious faith and today’s words are from Alison Ehrman in honour of the start of Autumn. I invite those of you at home to light a candle if you wish at this time.

Our chalice...

Lighting the Chalice by Alison Ehrman

A single flame,
The distinction between dark and light,
Cold and warmth,
Stillness and movement,
Wisdom and naiveté.
As this season marks the blending of these forces,
So let us join to harvest the blessing of our own dual natures.

Let us come together in song as we sing our first hymn. Feel free to sing, sway or just listen to the words as you are moved to do – the song is from the purple books it is no. 43 *Gather the spirit*. The words will appear on the screen.

1st hymn = P: 43 Gather the spirit

This Friday saw the start of autumn with the equinox. The September equinox marks the start of autumn in the Northern Hemisphere. It is the mid-way point between the summer and winter solstices, the time when the length of day and night are nearly equal before the night starts to draw in closer.

I said *nearly* equal as this week I learned of the equinox. Now if you were not familiar with it - the equinox is the time when there *is* equal day and night. The word equinox is made up of the Latin terms for equal and light.

The MET office website informed me that the equinox just *gives* the impression of equal day and night because the top of the Sun appears to rise above the horizon before it really does. Due to refraction by the Earth's atmosphere the Sun appears to rise before its centre is at the horizon, giving more daylight than we expect on the equinox. For example, it would have been light for 12 hours 10 minutes on Friday rather than 12 hours.

Now for us in the UK the equinox occurs a couple of days after the equinox and today is the day where we **will** experience equal day and night! You may have already known this or not think it is anything of note and that is fine.

I however count myself extra lucky to be able to lead today's worship and consider today to be a special day indeed – but that is because Autumn is my favourite time of year - are there any other Autumn lovers here today? Don't be shy!

The changing of the seasons is considered an important time worthy of festivity and have been celebrated by people of various beliefs for centuries. I will mention a few...

In ancient Greece a festival called *Thesmophoria* was held at the beginning of autumn. This festival was exclusively held by women to honour Demeter the Goddess of Harvest and her daughter Persephone. Some of you may recall the myth of them which is used to explain why we have the seasons as Persephone spends half the year in the dark Underworld with her husband Hades and the other half with her mother on earth.

In Japan the autumn equinox sits in the middle of a 7-day festival period. The day of the equinox itself is known as *Higan* and is a national holiday. During *Higan* families will visit the graves of their ancestors' taking offerings of food and flowers as memorial services are held at Buddhist temples.

For over 3000 years, China has celebrated the full harvest moon and the festival to do so is as popular as New Year in Chinese culture. Special pastries known as Mooncakes are eaten at this time with friends and family and ceremonies are held to give thanks for the harvest and to encourage the next year's harvest.

In Nigeria, the Yoruba tribe dances to celebrate the yam festival and the Iroquois honour the corn festival with dancing and the sharing of corn bread and soup.

Pagans, Hindus, Christians and many other people of specific spiritual paths or none honour this time of year.

There really is a world-wide celebration of nature at this time of year – millions of people show their gratitude for the fruits of the earth and for their loved ones and community.

The way harvest is celebrated in churches across Britain today stems from a tradition started in 1843. The Reverend Robert Hawker in Morwenstow invited parishioners to a thanksgiving service and from that invitation developed the Harvest Service with its customs of singing harvest songs, sharing food and decorating churches with produce you may be familiar with today.

Now this is not just a time for sharing food and celebrating nature's harvest. Oh no – this time of balance before nature's wheel turns again offers us a time of natural pause to consider our own harvest, to consider the seeds we have sown this year.

The reason I am so pleased to be here today is having learnt recently of the equinox the beauty is we still are within this magical time of balance! Even though the equinox has passed, today is the day when the time of light and dark is equal...

and historically in the UK the harvest was not considered to be over until Michaelmas or St. Michael's Mass on 29th September so there still is plenty of time for ritual, reflection and feasting!

Before I invite you to join me in some ritual and reflection, I now invite you to invoke the divine spirit of nature, the spirit of life into this space with song. Our second hymn is no. 148 in the purple book.

2nd hymn = P:148 Spirit of Life, come unto me

Beautiful! Thank you.

Now, back at the start of the service I quoted James Allen, an early 20th century British writer of spiritual and philosophical works. – I will repeat them now:

“Every fact and process in Nature contains a moral lesson for the wise man. All the parables of Jesus are illustrative of this truth, and are drawn from the simple facts of

nature. There is a process of seed-sowing in the mind and life, a spiritual sowing which leads of a harvest according to the kind of seed sown.”

I believe we can learn from nature’s process of harvest by meditating on the adage *We Reap What We Sow* however, when I sat and re-read *The Parable of the Sower*, I found myself thinking more about *How we Sow* rather than what.

In Matthew chapter 13 (verses 3-8) Jesus tells of a farmer whose seeds were sown somewhat indiscriminately across various terrain. Some of the seeds fell on a path and were eaten by birds, some landed on rocks and even though they started to grow they were scorched by the sun and had no soil to root. Other seeds fell within thorns and were choked, **but** a number of seeds **did** land on good soil **and** produced a generous crop for the farmer.

Now you may feel that the farmer did the right thing sowing their seeds in this manner - in doing so they increased the possibility of a good yield...perhaps?

Or you might think it would have been better if the farmer had taken the time to think about where they were putting the seed?

Or if they had taken the time to check on how they were doing – they could have moved the shoots on the rocks to somewhere where they could root and be away from direct sun or they could have rescued those that were being choked.

You may have focused on how not all the seed went to waste as birds were able to eat them and some did produce a generous crop even though it sounds like many did get past the initial stages of germination.

Does the parable illustrate to you the importance of not spreading ourselves too thin? Of not sowing so many seeds we cannot tend to them all? Or of being more mindful about what we are sowing and why?

I wonder what you think and whether it gives you an incentive to consider what sort of farmer you are?

So, farmers - if you consider the seeds *you* have sown in the past year how are your yields looking?

How have your seeds of goals or plans planted come to fruition?

Did they land on good soil and grow strong or have they weakened due to their environment...or perhaps disappeared completely?

Now plans and goal change and death isn’t imperatively a bad thing – like the seasons everything changes. Some things stay with us and others don’t – this is absolutely natural.

Perhaps you don’t feel able to consider these questions right now.

I know that to stop and take time to reflect fully on ourselves can be really hard – to truly acknowledge what our lives are really like and why. This is difficult when things

are going relatively well even but if you are struggling right now it can seem impossible – I say to you hold fast. You are stronger than you know.

To reflect and face the consequences of our actions and attitude throughout this year's harvest can take great courage. But the rewards of being so open provides the opportunity to see what you want to change.

You may consider the emotional, physical or material seeds planted in readiness for the colder months.

This could be something you did that was wholly practical such as checking to see if you are eligible for any government support for your utilities or whether you are on the best rate available to you?

Or...perhaps you focus specifically on aspects of your spirituality by having a Harvest of the Soul.

You may consider how you have helped nourish your spirituality this year or that of others through the seeds of ritual or action. How are you honouring you and the divine of your understanding?

The key thing to remember is this time of year is all about **balance** and **gratitude** – appreciate and honour the harvests you **have** reaped.

I am not suggesting you ignore the negative those seeds that did not come to realisation or the hard times or mistakes but I ask you to show **compassion** and **patience** with yourself (and others!). In doing this you are strengthening the positive and you are encouraging healthy growth rather than allowing seeds of negativity take root.

I wholeheartedly invite you to take some time over the next few days to reflect on your personal harvests. Enjoy the fruits of your labours – acknowledge where you have worked hard, even those small harvests or yields that you may feel are insignificant, be reassured that **they are significant** – they are something you carried to fruition.

If you don't feel that doing something so personal is open to you then you may wish to honour all those who make it possible for you to have the food you do – so much goes into food production and by acknowledging those who got the food from seed to store is perfect for showing gratitude at harvest.

Remember - you are the great farmer of your harvest – take care of the seeds that matter most to you – be mindful of where they end up and check they have what they need to grow. These seeds will help sustain you in body, mind and spirit during the Ember months.

We will now have our own Harvest ritual followed by time for contemplative reflection and personal prayer but first...

in the spirit of the season, I now invite:

- **those of you in church to now bring any harvest festival donations you have to the table.**
- **I also invite those in church to the lectern if you wish to share something you are grateful for this autumn or to share a seed you have planted this year.**
- **Those of you joining us online please do share your gratitude and seeds in the chat and I will share them with the church shortly.**

Thank you all for your donations – they are much appreciated and I am sure will be greatly received when taken to a local Food Bank.

We come now to a time of prayer followed by silence to allow time for personal prayer or reflection. After the silence some accompanying music will play.

*Dear Spirit of Life and Love,
We have so much before us
and for this we are thankful.
We have so many blessings,
and for this we are thankful.
There are others not so fortunate,
and by this we are humbled.
We make an offering in their name
to the gods who watch over us,
that those in need are someday
as blessed as we are this day.
Blessed Be.*

Prayer by Patti Wigington.

Music during reflective period = Alex Varmatt *Autumnal Equinox* (2:54)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0CdGoozpvac>

Today's reflective music was by Alex Varmatt and is entitled *Autumnal Equinox*.

Poem – inspired by Wednesday 21st being the International Day of Peace

Give us peace by Lassi Nummi

'Anna meille rauha', from *Requiem* (Otava, 1990) translated by Donald Adamson

Read by Edgar

The earth has found peace
as the autumn harvest ripens
and the corn is cut.
It will sleep in peace
when the snow of winter covers it.

– We children of earth will have peace
when the harvest of days ripens,
when the harvest of life is cut.

You who are holy and unknown, incomprehensible, holy and invisible,
give us peace.
Peace to those who have slept in darkness and silence.
Peace to us, hurrying onwards still
amid the lights and hubbub of the world.

Give us peace.
Peace to those who are whirled by joy and pain and longing,
peace in which is humble joy and sorrow
and the strength to finish the day's task.
And give peace also
to hands that have fallen from their task,
to eyes that are shut in sleep –
the peace that unites those who sleep and are gone from us
with those still wandering here.
The peace which passes all understanding,
Your peace,
give it to them, and to us.

Let us join together now to give thanks in song. Our third and final hymn today:

3rd hymn = G: 271 Give thanks for the corn

Before I give our closing words, I want to just say thanks to all again for coming today and that I wish you all bountiful harvests this autumn.

Today's closing music is entitled *You Reap What You Sow* - the words, music and video made me think it was perfect for today - I hope you enjoy it.

Notices will be shared after the music video and then there will be time to talk online and share lunch in the church hall - please stay if you can.

Extinguishing the Chalice by Alison Ehrman

As we return into the world,
May we carry the light within our hearts,
The warmth within our souls,
The stillness within our minds,
And the wisdom within our actions.
May our harvests be as enriching as they are bountiful.
So mote it be.

Music @ end of service = Mara Levine *You Reap What You Sow* (3:07)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1qQ0mR4Smu8>