Before coming here, my last call was in rural Southwestern Minnesota. Especially this time of year, I am reminded that there is a lot I don’t miss about Minnesota. I don’t miss the choking humidity of the summers, or the hoards of bloodthirsty mosquitoes, or the flat, mountainless horizons. I don’t miss the two weeks of mud between when the boilers were turned off for the winter and when the air conditioners were turned on for the summer. But there is one thing I miss very much. I miss being around the farmers.

Every Friday, I would go to the town hall in Swift Falls, MN, a town of about 75 residents, and sit to have coffee with the local farmers (most of whom were members of Shepherd of the Hills, where I served). They’d sit swap stories and jokes, they’d tell tales of trips taken and memories of years long past. They’d also talk shop: the price of corn and beans, the repairs they’d made to their equipment, how much rain they’d gotten or expected to get. A lot of it was well beyond me, but I learned a lot from those morning conversations.

It reminds me of a story the rabbis tell. There were two brothers who had spent their entire lives in the city and had never seen a field or a meadow. The brothers decided to take a trip to the country. On their trip, they observed a farmer plowing his field. They were puzzled. “What on earth is he doing that for?” they wondered. “He rips up the ground with these deep ugly cuts! Why would anyone take such a beautiful, green piece of land and destroy it like that?” Then they saw him sowing grain in the furrows. “Look at this madman!” they said, “He takes good wheat and throws it away, burying it in the ground!” The first brother spat in disgust, “Only crazy people live in the country. I’ve had enough, I’m going home to where people are sane!” And so he returned to the city.

Like the first brother in the story, we non-agrarian types sometimes think of farmers as “crazy;” as simple or unsophisticated. Living in Minnesota, I saw that farmers are inventors, innovators, strategists. A farmer can take a welder and a tablesaw and fix a broken piece of multi-million dollar machinery, or create a tool for pennies that replaces something that retails for hundreds of dollars. Farmers teach themselves to program GPS computers in their combines and how to read the fluctuations of crop prices.

And farmers are master strategists. They have to be! They know they can’t make the seeds that they plant grow, and so they observe and plan and theorize to get the best possible yield based on what they know, taking into account predicted weather patterns, soil chemistry, the price of commodities, and a host of other factors. Any one stroke of bad luck—a hail storm, a drought, a flood, a drop in the price of corn, a shortage of seed or fertilizer—and everything changes; and so they have to have strategies in place for all those things, too.

This is what the second brother learned. When the first brother left to return to the city, he stayed. He watched as the grains sown by the farmer sprouted first into green shoots and then ripened into golden stalks of wheat. He was so awed by this incredible change that he sent a letter to his brother in the city telling him only that he would have to come to see with his own eyes if he was to believe what had taken place. The first brother returned to the country and was delighted with what he saw, and they both began to understand the purpose of the farmer’s work.

The farmer’s strategy seemed at first to be lunacy to the two brothers, but in time, they came to see that what seemed like wastefulness and stupidity actually turned out to be a well thought-out strategy. This is what the farmer in the story knows, and what the sower in the parable knows, and what Jesus knows: sometimes preparing for the harvest takes an act of faith.

What farmers understand, perhaps better than those of us who have never worked the land, is that we cannot create the harvest. In reading Jesus’ parable, Jesus says we’re meant to understand the seed as the word of God, the gospel message; but what is the harvest? Is it more word to be sown? Is it the fruit of repentance in the hearts of the people who hear it? Is it the kingdom of God itself, sprouting up in the world? Maybe it is all of these things. Whatever it is, Jesus seems to be appealing to that wisdom of the farmer: as we share that message, we cannot make any of these things come about. That is God’s work and God’s work alone. We cannot create them any more than we can create wheat from nothing— but we can create the opportunity for them to grow.

In the parable, Jesus describes the different types of soil as different types of people. Such a reading also invites us to consider whether we ourselves are “good soil” or not. We even have a hymn we sing about it: “Lord Let My Heart be Good Soil.” It’s an idea worth exploring, but so is the idea that each of our own hearts might be fields in themselves. What if our hearts are not one kind of soil or another, but a field in which there are many different kinds of soil? Perhaps we all need to hear the word in different ways—not just through our corporate worship, for example, but also through individual spiritual practices, by living it out in our daily lives, experiencing it alive in others, and hearing the stories of others’ experience of the word. If we neglect one or more of these strategies of sowing that seed in our own hearts, we may be missing out on a fuller harvest of God’s word in our own lives.

The rabbis’ story continues when the farmer came with his scythe and began cutting down those beautiful, golden fields. The first brother was flabbergasted: “How insane!” he said. “He has worked for months to produce this lovely wheat, and now he is destroying it with his own hands. I am disgusted with this idiot; I’m going back to the city!”

In this COVID time, we’ve had to cut down what has been the center of our lives together as a community: our corporate, in-person worship. Different congregations have responded in different ways. Many, including us, have taken to meeting online. It’s not quite the same, but it’s something. Others have been meeting outside, or doing “drive-through” services in stations, or sitting in their cars in the parking lot listening to the service over the radio. When we do eventually come back together, we will need to consider how that meeting will be changed by social distancing rules, or by our inability to sing together, or by having to limit how many of us can gather at a time.

Along with the first brother in the story, we may see these things as being completely insane, totally opposed to the entire idea of what worship is. If we cannot be in person together, sharing physical contact and raising our voices together in song, what are we doing? If we can’t share the Body and Blood of Christ together in a single room, eating from the same loaf and drinking from the same cup, will it be enough?

With our corporate worship as we knew it gone, I wonder if this COVID time of quarantine and social distancing can be an opportunity for us to think about how we are sowing and tending the fields of our own hearts, our own spirituality. Our online worship is important, but it’s just not the same. Perhaps what this time is teaching us is that, in order to help God’s word take root in our own lives and in the world around us, in order to prepare for the harvest of God’s kingdom, we need a strategy that is bigger than just our corporate worship. Perhaps now more than ever we ought to be thinking how we can spread the seed more broadly in our own hearts so that God can bring a more abundant harvest.

This might include things we’ve never considered before. Perhaps we may take up a discipline of daily prayer, or acts of service, or donating to causes or organizations dear to us. I have a friend who has chosen this time to fast from alcohol in order to help himself experience it in a different and more spiritually fulfilling way.

We created the social clusters in our congregation for this time so that we might give ourselves the opportunity to connect with others in a way that we never have before through phone calls, Zoom chats, letter writing, or other ways. It is my hope that we can use this time of isolation to actually help us deepen our relationships within the congregation and appreciate even more the people in the community to which God has called us.

This is especially personal to me as I embark on my Sabbatical tomorrow. This call has been fulfilling in many ways over the last 5 years, but it has also left me drained in others. I am realizing that I have not been as attentive to my own spiritual health as I need to be, and that if I am to continue to be an effective pastor and a healthy Christian, I need to find new strategies to nurture that health.

I am going to be spending this time sowing seed, hopefully finding some personal spiritual practices which will produce a harvest to sustain me through the rest of my career. I hope that through this practice of Sabbath rest and some intentional spiritual and professional development, I will return to you in October not only with new energy and better spiritual health for myself, but also with new tools and insights to help this congregation as we together imagine where God might be calling us from here. Maybe this is a time for each of us to be doing the same sowing in our own lives.

At the end of the rabbi’s story, the first brother returns, but the other waits to see what will happen next. He watches as the farmer skillfully winnows the grain and gathers it into his granary, marvelling at the amazing harvest he collected: a hundred-fold what he began with. “Turns out,” he thought to himself, “There was a method to the madness all along.”