

Lessons from the Garden
June 27, 2010
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Please join with me in the Spirit of Prayer:

Loving Spirit, grant us presence, pure hearts and loving purpose in all we say and hear, knowing You are with us and that You speak to us in all ways. Amen.  
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Over the last two weeks my family and I have noticed that our summer garden is really beginning to show signs of potential. Our tomato plants are beginning to bud and one of our pepper plants has already produced a little pepper! Jim and Katie have started to thin out several rows of carrots. I don't think our broccoli will make it this year – the resident woodchuck has made himself quite at home and the little rascal has nibbled off the tops of the plants. But the zucchini plants have doubled in size which is pretty impressive! Unfortunately I have my doubts about the eggplant this year – those plants haven't done much of anything. I'm anticipating that Katie will be caught plucking sun-warmed cherry tomatoes to pop into her mouth pretty soon and Jim will begin to make his infamous pickles and sweet relish. I'm beginning to swap zucchini bread recipes with neighbors and friends, so if you have one...

Our garden is a big deal around the house. In fact, the whole thing begins to root and take on a life of its own in mid-January every year. You see, that's when the seed catalogs arrive. Before the arrival of the seed catalogs, our post-Christmas dinner conversations usually center around the winter forecast and school delays and laments about the obstacles we're already encountering with new years resolutions. But once the seed catalogs turn up in our mailbox, our dinner conversations spring to life and our imaginations soar. We debate about the best varieties of flowers and vegetables, who

wants what and how many, what has done well in the past and what would we like to try. All of our senses are involved as we ponder size, shape, color, taste, size, smell, texture, weather, sun, shade and seasons. Before we know it we've made plans and selected seeds for golden zucchini, jolly green peppers, sugar snap peas and scarlet carrots. Just thinking about what we'll have in our garden adds hope to the long winter days and brightens our lives.

Come spring, seedlings are started in April, the ground is tilled and prepared in May and planting seeds and plants commences not to long afterward when we anticipate that frosty nights are a thing of the past. All summer our family weeds, waters, periodically rotates the compost pile and takes turns chasing the woodchuck. And it's this time of the season that we each race to the garden after arriving home at the end of the day to see what has flowered, budded, bloomed or popped up from the ground. As the bounty is plucked and then washed in the kitchen sink and graces our meals, we'll thank God for the good food that gives us sustenance.

What is it about a garden that is so compelling? I mean, my family and I and many of you don't have to rely on what we harvest from our land, as so many others do in the world. Many of us choose to grow a garden and to move intentionally toward sustainable living as a matter of eco-justice. And yet, beyond these deliberate actions there is an even deeper longing in our hearts that gardening fulfills. Why do some of us still relish getting down on our knees, dirt under our fingernails and sweating in the sun? Why do we invest in these seeds and plants even when we know they'll never look as picture perfect as they appear in the seed catalogs?

My own meditations on these questions and observations I've made while watching our garden this year led me to rediscover a poem titled "The Common Living Dirt" by Marge Piercy¹:

As I kneel to put the seeds in
careful as stitching, I am in love.
You are the bed we all sleep on.
You are the food we eat, the food
we ate, the food we will become.
We are walking trees rooted in you...

Tending a plot of your flesh binds
me as nothing ever could, to the seasons,
to the will of the plants, clamorous
in their green tenderness. What
calls louder than the cry of a field
of corn ready, or trees of ripe peaches?

I worship on my knees, laying
the seeds in you, that worship rooted
in need, in hunger, in kinship,
flesh of the planet with my own flesh,
a ritual of compost, a litany of manure.
My garden's a chapel, and a meadow
gone wild in grass and flower
is a cathedral. How you seethe
with little quick ones, vole, field
mouse, shrew and mole in their thousands,
rabbits and woodchuck. In you rest
the jewels of the genes wrapped in seed...

We must come again and worship you
on our knees, the common living dirt.

For many, gardening taps into that longing to do the daily things deeply. It's one of many different ways to practice spiritual maintenance and to integrate the fruits of faith into our daily living. Gardening is hard work and requires patience and faith.

¹ Marge Piercy, *Stone, Paper, Knife*, © 1983. See <http://www.margepiercy.com/books/stone-paper-knife.htm> for more information about this volume of poetry and Marge Piercy's work; this particular poem can also be found at <http://www.motherearthnews.com/Nature-Community/2002-04-01/The-Common-Living-Dirt.aspx>.

The Bible, too, speaks of the mystery of gardening, and it is often used to illustrate a variety of spiritual themes: God's providential love and care, our connectedness to the earth and the responsibility we have been given to care for it, the necessity for spiritual growth and renewal and the reality of our ultimate hope.

Our reading from Mark today is the first story that Jesus tells to the crowds who have gathered to hear him by the sea shortly after he's been accused of being possessed by the devil by the religious leaders and scribes. This little story seems harmless at first. It is a familiar agricultural story to these people gathered on the land, listening to Jesus' voice echoing off the waters. This story doesn't contain one word of theology, not one quote from the Torah, no prophetic judgments, not even an ounce of controversy.² Who would take issue with nature, which grants a sower's seed four radically different destinies, based on the quality of soil into which it is sown? Isn't this just simple farm talk, of which one quarter of the seed, fortunately broadcasted into good soil, yields an exceedingly abundant harvest?

But a story can be a very powerful thing. Twice Jesus has commanded all of the people and the disciples to listen – *really listen* with their ears, hearts, minds and lives – because through this gardening parable he's not speaking of sound horticultural practices but rather teaching them about the kingdom of God. It's an action-packed and subversive story of faith, abundance and transformation. This parable is intended to break open and shatter prevailing world views, replacing them with new ones that bring new understanding and hope.

² Brian Morgan, "Stories from the Underground". Sermon April 26, 1998, found at www.pbcc.org/sermons/morgan/1112.html on June 6, 2008.

Contemporary singer and song writer Jack Johnson sings of this kind of subversive understanding and hope in the lyrics from his popular song “All at Once”.³ He sings:

I wanna take the preconceived out from underneath your feet.

We could shake it off, but instead we'll plant some seeds.

We'll watch 'em as they grow, And with each new beat from your heart, the roots grow deeper. The branches, well, they'll reach for what? Nobody really knows. But underneath it all there's this heart alone!

Returning to the garden as creative and spiritual expression, another contemporary voice, Landscape Architect and Environmental Artist Topher Delaney says “a garden is in essence a natural consequence of action. To make a garden is to invest in the future. The verb “to garden” references physical action but also an evocation of faith in the future.”⁴ To garden then, and to hear this Scripture lesson and respond, is to participate in hope. It’s an invitation to be a co-creator with the Sower and a witness to the possibilities and promises that are in store for us. Today’s lesson highlights the hope we too have in this promise. Consider (elaborate on points):

- Faith Quest – Our summer faith formation program; it’s emphasis on the Parable of the Sower;
- NE Regional Youth Event participation.

You see, ultimately hope is the force behind all the sowing, whether it be in the ground or in the soil of our hearts. And when it comes to faith, it’s not that only some of

³ Jack Johnson, “Sleep Through the Attic,” Brushfire Records, 2008.

⁴ Lecture, *Garden: An Act of Faith*. Trinity Church, Boston, MA, May 4, 2010. For more information about Topher Delaney, her philosophy about gardening and environmental architecture, see her website at www.tdelaney.com.

the seeds sown by God possess the spark of life, they all do. Rather, it is the condition and preparedness of our hearts that determines what will grow and how in the garden of our hearts. And so we need to be alert, to be listening, to be accepting and to be patient.

And just as God is the Sower of all our lives, we too are called to be Gardeners, to care for one another and nurture each other in the faith. Today, as we baptized Avery Marie, we were actively cultivating the seeds of Christian faith, bearing witness to the promise of eternal life and investing our hope in Avery's future. And God, who has placed these seeds, careful as stitching, is depending on our proclamation of love, support and care so that the seeds planted in this child's heart will grow and increase and one day yield thirty and sixty and a hundredfold. This child of God needs us to take seriously this baptism, a faithful and sacred practice of living hope, as do all the children of God.

It strikes me that the spelling of soul and soil are so similar and only different by one letter. Gardening the common living dirt and tending to our very hearts may not be so different after all. And maybe that's what Jesus is getting at. This parable of the sower invites us as a community to reflect on the complexities of living and our limitless potential. As a church, how do we cultivate the good soil of our hearts and others? Is it our responsibility? How do we share and hear the Word? How do we accept it with all that we face, individually, as a congregation as beings on this planet? How do we bear fruit as a community? What will we choose to plant in our lives and the lives of others? How can we encourage and invite one another to participate, to share, to invest in a future of hope and expectation? These are questions we can all ask one another and explore together. Certainly there won't be one simple answer – the possibilities are as

varied as the seeds in seed catalogs and they require our imagination and all of our senses. We have been commanded to listen – now and in the future because the seeds sown in all our lives are the seeds of our collective potential. They have been lavishly scattered by the Sower and they are the sparks of the divine. We must actively listen and hope so that some can take root in the earthiness of our lives and grow. And in good soil, the seeds will grow, increasing and yielding thirty and sixty and a hundredfold. May it be so!