

The Rev. Emily Dunevant

August 11, 2019  
The Ninth Sunday after Pentecost

Luke 12:32-40  
Genesis 15:1-6  
Psalm 33:12-22  
Hebrews 11:1-3,8-16

---

I was looking out at our garden behind the church the other day. You may remember that on our church work day, a number of us tilled the soil, planted seeds, and watered the ground. Cultivating something we weren't quite sure of but we were excited about the possibilities.

The soil had been challenging the previous year. Some of the garden boxes were generous with their yield, while others seemed completely barren. Not having a green thumb, I felt rather helpless to make things better. Truth be told, I was thankful when the growing season was over last year and I could pull up all of the plants that had let me down. It had been an exhausting and at times unfulfilling attempt at making peace with this patch of earth. And so I set my sights on trying again this year.

And, that's what we did. I was so hopeful. I felt assured that our good efforts and mediocre gardening skills would produce something worthwhile. It didn't take long until sprouts starting to come up. Flowers, beans, corn, tomatoes, cucumbers. Inch by inch they started to grow. I kept the weeds at bay. We watered the garden when rain was scarce. Things were looking good.

Until...until our cucumbers turned out yellow. Until two of the raised beds grew nothing except a healthy patch of weeds. Until a raccoon climbed the fence and ate most of the corn. I am already counting down the days until I can pull everything up so I don't have to keep being reminded of all of those good efforts gone south.

Sometimes it's hard to see the good in what we do when the weeds and the raccoons keep getting in the way. It can be discouraging and defeating. It can make you want to stop trying. We tell ourselves...maybe this just isn't for me. However, in the midst of the garden failures this year also came some beautiful flowers...giant sunflowers, zinnias, daisies, and gardenias. We cultivated delicious field peas and enough corn to make a one pot of creamed corn. The tomatoes were juicy and paired perfectly with the basil I had grown in my herb garden.

Maybe we didn't get everything we had hoped for, but we made progress. I am looking forward to figuring out how to make the soil even healthier for next spring. I have new direction and new insights from the work that we did.

Gardening always reminds me that we don't know what our efforts will yield in the end. There is uncertainty in the process of sowing. But there is also so much hope. And so we come back year after year and try and try again.

Last week, we tackled some difficult realities of our world. Of the strife and division that continues to grow in our country. Of the fear and uncertainty so many of you are feeling. We were challenged last week to consider our own agency in creating change, of working to establish a more just and caring society, of not falling into complacency when the problems seem too big.

And, at our Community Prayer Service last night we talked about faith and that well worn verse in Hebrews that faith is the assurance of things hoped for and the conviction of things not seen. How we long for the things yet unseen. How we long for peace and understanding. But how? That's the question. I read to our folks last night the words from one of my favorite writers, Debbie Thomas, "Faith is the audacity to undertake a perilous journey simply because God asks us to — not because we know ahead of time where we're going."

So this morning I want you to consider two things. The first is that we all must have faith in working for peace as we cultivate healthy ground. The second is that we won't know the results of our efforts (at least not right away). But we have to keep trying and listening for how God is calling each of us to give of ourselves in both bold and humble ways.

As many of you know, before coming to Grace, I worked in the Chaplaincy at the University of Richmond. My main role was taking students abroad to places of conflict in the world to consider where faith was working to build bridges in areas of pain and suffering. We visited community groups, government and military leaders, families and faith communities. It was difficult work but we began to see one narrative continuing to emerge. That was the importance of planting and cultivating. Of taking little steps to build trust across lines of difference even in the midst of war and tension and bombings. These were places of deep fear and resentment yet they were also places of individuals committed to making a difference. They were the people with the audacity of faith to undertake a perilous journey simply because God asked them to.

5 years ago, I was in Israel on one of these trips with eight of our students, They were Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, and Muslim. One of my co-leaders was a hip Orthodox Rabbi named Eitan. We were not your average tour group. But, we traveled with a common purpose of learning from one another in this land that is full of promise, tension, hope, and fear. We were committed to walking alongside one another and facing our toughest questions about what it means to have faith in an often uncertain world.

In the midst of our journey, one story stands out. One of our students, a female Muslim, had committed to praying at least 3 times a day while in Israel. She told me she wasn't the most observant person of faith but on this particular journey, she wanted to explore the roots of her faith and find a renewed connection to her religion. Our challenge was finding a prayer space for her but she also needed to be accompanied by someone so that she wasn't a young girl alone in an unfamiliar city.

Prayer space was hard to come by. She became discouraged. And then, something truly remarkable happened. Our guide, Eitan, an Orthodox Rabbi who also prays at least 3 times a day, offered to pray with our Muslim student. He committed to creating space for the two of them to pray alongside each other because as a rabbi in Jerusalem he had access to prayer space that she did not.

One day, they prayed together in the Jewish Quarter of the Old City of Jerusalem, the orthodox rabbi and the young Muslim girl. Eitan laughed afterwards saying they were quite the curiosity for the Jewish children running around in the neighborhood. I like to think that they were sowing beautiful seeds of understanding and peace building that day by the example they set of their mutual respect for one another. I would like to think that the children who watched in wonder will remember the day they saw an Orthodox Rabbi pray alongside a young Muslim girl. We will never know the result of their actions. I do know, however, that they showed us what it truly means to grow together, to take whatever steps you can as an individual to live out an example of love and compassion and caring.

I tell this story because I know it's often easy to be cynical about the state of peace in the world whether it's in Israel or our own back yard. We may think that the challenges seem too great or that the pain and violence will never be overcome. We may think that if we don't see the results of our efforts that our efforts were futile at best. We may watch the news and think that racism will never get better or that hate will never be overcome or that mass shootings won't stop. We may think we can't make a difference.

I may never know how the image of a rabbi praying with a Muslim will ring in the memories of the children who saw them that day. I will never know. But I do have hope that they cultivated change.

Because you know what? The effort of cultivating the garden is an important part of the equation. And we are told to cultivate without knowing the outcome. Some of our efforts will bear fruit, others will decay. Others may bring us pain and others will certainly bring us joy.

This is the mystery of the unknown harvest. One thing is certain – we must start digging our patch of earth, scatter the seeds we have been given, and then care for that sacred ground. And, then we wait. Wait for those things seen and unseen. So keep your hearts open and your faith alive. Don't worry if you don't see results right away but trust that God is there working the soil, making it stronger day by day. Thanks be to God.