

Easter V Year B 2018

About eight or nine years ago, I came home to find Katharine digging up our front yard... I mustered the courage to ask her why... and she said that instead of a grassy lawn, she wanted a par tiered vegetable garden... She had read that many people after World War II planted victory gardens in their front yards as signs of hope and renewed possibility. Who was I to argue? We got busy with our victory garden. We laid it out in four quadrants. We found a miniature wrought iron fence for it. We filled it with soil and compost, and we planted eggplant and tomatoes and squash and peppers... and of course herbs: fennel and dill and basil and thyme. We had high hopes for this garden... I think it is true of all gardeners that they thrive on high hopes. I'm not a gardener. I'm a proud gardener's assistant, and moral supporter. Katharine is the gardener... but even gardener's assistants have high hopes for the garden.

But alas, the garden didn't turn out the way we expected... the way we had hoped it would. The herbs did well, except for the thyme when exposed to Mobile summer heat; and the tomatoes were a decided disappointment. We discovered that there is such a thing as a bug with a proboscis that sucks the juice out of tomatoes just at their ripening. The squash was a disaster. Word got out among the legions of squash borers that live in our part of the world that we had planted

yellow squash, and they moved in, and over-night decimated our squash crop. And then there is the matter of the weeds; and the weather. The eggplant and the peppers did okay. All was not lost. We had our soil tested... too much phosphorus, the experts said... so, unbroken, Katharine changed strategies. She planted Echinacea, and milkweed and daisies and salvia and zinnias. Our garden is not at all what we expected or planned it to be, but to us it is beautiful as ever; so full of possibility; maybe because our labor is in it that it renders it beautiful... and we still have high hopes for it; but we have learned to improvise, the gardener and I... we have learned that there is a difference between hope and expectation.

This is a metaphor of course... The garden since time immemorial has been a consummate metaphor for life itself. The editors of the Book of Genesis place the beginnings of the human enterprise in a garden. We tend to think of the first garden, Eden, so-called, in the creation story as some idyllic place, but like all gardens I'm pretty sure there were weeds and blight and mulch and work... failure and accomplishment; joy and disappointment.

The metaphor makers of John's gospel from which we just read are at it again, and they must have known something of gardening. We have encountered a string of metaphors since the prologue of this gospel. I am Word; I am light; I am

the gate, the door, I am the good shepherd, I am bread and wine, I am body and blood... and here, I am the grapevine. My father, Jesus says, is the gardener. I am vine, you are branches.... Metaphors beguiling us into insight, drawing us towards the ephemeral knowledge as to the person of the Christ.... Why not just tell us? We ask... just give us the facts of the matter. Give us the playbook; reveal the mystery in black and white. But, of course, mystery is not like that. Mystery and therefore truth are not quantifiable; they can't be categorized. We can't possess them. We can only get a taste of them; yet an experience of them to be sure, even if a glimpse... but such an experience requires the active imagination. That's why John teaches through metaphor. That's why Jesus teaches in parables. That is why I say theology is always speculative and open ended; that faith is not about getting it all straight and right and ordered, but that faith is a journey of discovery and learning and experience. Truth is not cast in stone; it evolves and grows and changes. It reincarnates; it is mutable... like life itself. Like a garden.

The church over the centuries has tried her hardest however to cast our faith in stone, particularly in the West. It has to its detriment created hard and fast rules... Rules... that's where the word "religion" comes from. And religion by definition is limiting, confining. The Lutherans tried to codify what it is we know and believe in the Book of Concord to which the faithful had to swear their

assent, and later, the Augsburg Confession; the Presbyterians have the Westminster Confession, a long litany as to the right way to believe; The Roman Catholics have their monolithic Magisterium that would seek to drum out of the faith any hint of mystery or uncertainty... and we have our ancient creeds that we still say or sing; feeble attempts, all, at summarizing something that can't be summarized. What I am saying is that our Christian tradition, the good and the bad, shapes us and roots us in history, but the life of faith is first and foremost about being open to possibility; open to discovery; a surrender, as it were, to the world's random unfolding. The life of faith is not meant to be lived according to a rigid plan, but is improvised. That is the way life is. Gardeners know that.

So let's look at our reading for today from John... the metaphor du jour, if you will: A vineyard... a garden... a garden that is subject to weeds and blight and drought, but also capable of producing bountiful fruit, fruit that will become wine, no less; A garden demands hard work, and expertise, and persistence; a garden requires a mature approach to expectations; a mature approach to failure; as a gardener (or a gardener's assistant) one learns from past mistakes; one must seek advice; when a gardener, it is expedient to take the help of other gardeners.... To be a gardener (or gardener's assistant) one must be comfortable with uncertainty and the ambiguity of process. To be an effective gardener, we don't hang our hat

on hard and fast plans...Hone your improvisational skills, good people. I could go on with this reverie, but you get the metaphorical point.

But here's the thing: The garden is not some idyllic place, apart from the world we live in... the garden is our world, and our world is the kingdom of God... the Good and the Bad, the whole of it... The kingdom of God is neither some utopian fantasy, nor is it reserved for the next life... We are being instructed in this Gospel how to live in God's world here and now; the world God calls good despite being riddled with paradox: good and evil; dark and light; we are being instructed how to be seasoned gardeners, (and gardener's assistants)... and it all comes down to one thing that I have not said... and that is what is at the heart of this Gospel, and what is at the heart of a successful garden... and that is Love... All Gardeners know this... that the first thing is that one must love one's garden. There is no sacrifice too great for the good of the garden... So God is the gardener; God's life is sacrifice... and the son is of God, with God, in God, the formula in John... and the son is the vine, and we are the branches... of the same DNA, sharing the same nutrients... we are not just symbiotic... we are of an organic whole. We are in short branches of the Love of God; and as branches of God who is love, it is for us to bear the fruits of Love... the fruits being mercy, and kindness, and dignity and justice; justice that is all about the gracious well-being of the

garden... Reinhold Niebuhr, the great theologian of the twentieth century, said that God's dream for the world is Love, and the means of Love is justice... We are to be about the means of Love... and Love like a garden is process... not an end. The kingdom of God is the indomitable process of Love. John refers to the Holy Spirit as the Advocate. Love is the process of advocacy... Like in a garden: food enough; water, shade, sacred space within which to thrive...

So to all of you I say be open to the infinite possibilities of Love... Love that is being improvised into our world; and we are a vital part of that improvisation.... Love is the means by which we are citizens of God's kingdom. Love is the only creative means by which we can live with any integrity in God's complicated and ambiguous world....It is the only means of sanity... Love will always opt for the greater good. Love will always choose the common good over self-interest. Love exults in things excellent, and in things beautiful. Love doesn't have lofty expectations, but has high hopes. And nothing can break Love, not disappointment nor failure nor fear. Love persists and Love endures, and Love never dies... So I say that it is Love that makes a gardener (and a gardener's assistant). And I repeat the words of St. John the Evangelist, plain and simple... "Abide in Love."

There is a story about St. Francis of Assisi who when asked what he would do if he knew for sure that the world was about to end... His answer was that he would keep hoeing his garden! Brothers and sisters, the garden is the only thing; so we have to learn to be good and accomplished gardeners. And it is Love that will make us so. It is Love that teaches us to have high hopes, and Love will not fail us... nor will it ever fail the garden.