

## "Community Gardening"

Rev. Rachel H. Vogado

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*<sup>1</sup>And so, brothers and sisters, I could not speak to you as spiritual people, but rather as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. <sup>2</sup>I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for solid food. Even now you are still not ready, <sup>3</sup>for you are still of the flesh. For as long as there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not of the flesh, and behaving according to human inclinations? <sup>4</sup>For when one says, "I belong to Paul," and another, "I belong to Apollos," are you not merely human? <sup>5</sup>What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you came to believe, as the Lord assigned to each. <sup>6</sup>I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. <sup>7</sup>So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. <sup>8</sup>The one who plants and the one who waters have a common purpose, and each will receive wages according to the labor of each. <sup>9</sup>For we are God's servants, working together; you are God's field, God's building.*

*(1 Corinthians 3:1-9)*

During our last year of seminary Chris and I somehow found ourselves in charge of the recently created community garden. Columbia has this wonderful large field in between the dorms and family apartments, which for the longest time was used for ultimate Frisbee games, picnics, dog walks, and other outdoor festivities. Sometime before us a group of students decided that it would be wise to work together, be good stewards of God's earth, and create a space on the field to have different plots that students could tend for a year. The goal was to grow enough food to share with a homeless church community that was close to the seminary. By the time our senior year came around, Chris stepped into the lead role for the garden, which apart from caring for our own plot, duties also included getting everything tilled and ready, divvying out the plots and making sure the gardening tools didn't wander too far. I am relieved to tell you that the garden is still in place and thriving to this day, but I must also be truthful and admit that our year with the garden almost failed. Chris and I planted all sorts of things from tomatoes to jalapenos, beans and okra. Never have I been so anxious and excited watching the seedlings sprout and grow. We were feeling might proud of our green thumbs, and were enjoying the fruits of our labor with plenty of fresh veggies to eat. And then things spiraled out of control. Tending a garden, taking classes and preparing for ordination exams proved to be a bit more than any of us could handle. So weeds and vines took over, veggies ripened and then rotted, things grew too high and blocked the sun for others, plots merged into one another and our carefully planned and planted garden took on a life of its own. Were it not for a friend who had been apparently sneakily clipping and eating our wily sugar snap peas, I would say we failed. At least, if anything, we fed somebody.

Maybe, just maybe, by Paul's standards, we were a success. If the Apostle Paul had been in charge of the Columbia Seminary Community Garden, I can imagine that he would say that our carefully planned and divided plots took away from our shared vision and purpose. Paul



70 Union Street North  
Concord, NC 28025

(704) 788-2100

info@firstpresconcord.org

would also nudge us back to the spiritual aspect of what we were supposed to be doing. Sure we weren't arguing or fighting, but we certainly weren't working together. In today's reading, Paul is writing to the people of Corinth to correct and instruct and essentially calls them babies. Paul tells them that like infants, they are spiritually immature, not ready for solid food. Trust Paul to bring some theological and metaphorical sass. Despite all of what they have been taught, they continue to lose sight of what they are called to with all their distractions of jealousy and fighting. In their community of faith they have lost sight of their purpose. They have drawn a dividing line, chosen camps, putting more faith in the leaders Apollos or Paul than in God. Their identity has become bound to the spiritual leaders they feel they belong to, rather than finding their identity and belonging in God. Paul's anger is not at their pettiness or even their disagreements, but what is at the heart of those divisions. It is their spiritual arrogance that has revealed itself in the form of dominance that leads him to write such words.<sup>1</sup> But even then, Paul recognizes that their behavior is purely human.

And I think Paul might find us to be pretty human as well these days. When reading this scripture it is not too hard to take out Apollos and Paul and insert the names and things we belong to that have the potential to divide us. I belong to this denomination or that denomination or I belong to this Sunday School class or that one. Or to take it outside these walls; I belong to the Democrats or the Republicans, this team or that team, the NRA or the ACLU, the Boy Scouts or the Girls Scouts, Young Life or AARP, the Rotary Club or the American Legion. Our lives are constantly divided into plots of viewpoints and world outlooks. It is human to search for the places where we belong, to set up camp and settle in. It is human to seek comfort with the people who think and act like us. It is human to align with the things and people we love and to set ourselves apart from things we don't like and disagree with.

But Paul would remind us that we are called to something more and we have been created for something more. It is the very reason that Paul called the Corinthians out on their human-ness, repeating and emphasizing that that sort of behavior is of the flesh. And to simply be of the flesh means a disregard for the Spirit. The Spirit who gifts us different gifts and ideas, but who also calls us to unity. And this is where we have to be careful, especially as a church. In today's world it is easy to say we will just agree to disagree, or to avoid the hard conversations because we know there is no budging going to happen, or to leave things shallow and superficial because it is just too exhausting to go deeper. Or maybe it's easy to avoid things long enough all together that we stop showing up, or we just pack up our ball and go home. And friends, sometimes that scares me. And out of this fear, I have confessions to make. I have pruned my Facebook trying to tame the wild garden of lobbed arguments and hurled insults. I have grown numb to presbytery meetings where we vote on churches leaving the denomination and I no longer think twice about my vote. I have talked about weather more with family and friends because it is easier than talking about the growing distances between us because of ideologies and theology.

So I confess that I have been lulled into a false sense of unity. And I hear Paul's words ring loud and clear for me. And maybe you do too. Because all of this carefully crafted safe space I am making, avoiding hard conversations and differences as if they are landmines, sure feels easier than charging into the fray, but boy is it exhausting. I am worn out on this kind of

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<sup>1</sup> Jacobson, Rolf, Karoline Lewis, and Matt Skinner. "Sermon Brainwave." #524- Sixth Sunday after Epiphany. Working Preacher. 4 February 2017. Web. 7 February 2017.

unity. And this is what Paul warns us about. To say we are reaching out when we are standing safely on our side of the fence isn't connection. To say we are together when we are standing in our own separate boxes isn't community. And yet, Paul wouldn't say that you should give up or turn on what you believe in for the sake of unity. There is such a tension to hold here and the danger here is that we might hear Paul's words as a call to better manners or mere instruction for getting along and playing nice.

But Paul's words are meant to be a wake-up call, just like they were for the people of Corinth. Community is at stake and the deep division is deadly to the faith and the detrimental for the health of the body of Christ.<sup>2</sup> When we get so set apart by our beliefs and other various things we belong to, we begin to lose sight of our identity in Christ and our common purpose and calling. For the Corinthians, it wasn't wrong to follow Paul or Apollos, for they were both servants through whom the Corinthians came to believe in God, but they when they divided themselves into the two different camps, when they began to argue who was right and who was wrong, they lost track of their belonging to God. Even the most well-meaning groups can distract from who we are called and created to be. As Paul says, I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. Planting and watering are important, but growth doesn't happen unless the two happen together. For we are God's servants, working together. We are God's field.

So, field, how do we do this? How do we work for this unity when there is so much that divides us? How do we remember our identity and belonging in Christ when our sense of belonging, our ideologies and allegiances are scattered in so many different places? How do we create a fertile field for God's growth when we have stamped our feet and packed in the dirt of our safe foxholes where we are right? There are no easy answers here, no magic formulas, no divine roto-tillers. But I can offer you the words of Yehuda Amichai, a poet from Israel, and his poem titled "The Place Where We Are Right"

*From the place where we are right  
Flowers will never grow  
In the spring.*

*The place where we are right  
Is hard and trampled  
Like a yard.*

*But doubts and loves  
Dig up the world  
Like a mole, a plow.  
And a whisper will be heard in the place  
Where the ruined  
House once stood.<sup>3</sup>*

Amichai suggests that things might just change for the better and we could begin to grow if we spoke not from our certainties but from our doubts and loves. It is not about so earnestly speaking from where we are right and where others are wrong, no we won't get too far there. We

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Amichai, Yehuda. "The Place Where We Are Right." On Being with Krista Tippett (<http://www.onbeing.org/blog/the-place-where-we-are-right/>) 2014. Web. 7 February 2017.

will just continue to hard pack the earth, drawing dividing lines where nothing good can grow. To speak about our doubts and loves has echoes of what we do together in worship, where we are the body of Christ together. It is no mistake that our first move in worship after praise in our call to worship is to ask for forgiveness. To name and let go of the things that separate us from God and from one another. Our belonging is rooted in being part of a community that considers the forgiveness of sins as the way in, and being met with God's grace and then sharing that grace with one another. That is why we are here, that is why we need each other.

Two weeks ago I was in Denver at the Annual Conference for Presbyterian Church Educators. Hundreds of ministers, teachers, church folk alike gathered to shared ideas about how to better and creatively teach the faith to people of all ages. And we gathered around the theme "God With Us in the Chaos." In worship and plenaries we named some of the hard realities that we are facing, whether in the church or in the world. We talked about the tense climate in which we find ourselves, our polarized living that seems to show the common middle ground shrinking as we get pulled to two different ends of the spectrum. Writer, theologian and Lutheran Minister Nadia Bolz-Weber preached and spoke on just why she is staying in the church, even when has become such a hard place that struggles to be unified and often fails. She gave us three reasons, just three, though I am sure there are hundreds more, but they helped us all to take a deep breath and find hope. Number 1: I need the church and the Gospel in order to see myself differently. She named that the ugly, twisted thing in her, that she calls sin, needs the church so it can keep her from turning in on herself and away from God and neighbor. Number 2: I need the church because I need to see the world differently. The church opens her eyes to a different way to live or as she said, "In the same way that hurt people hurt people, forgiven people forgive people, and loved people love people, and grateful people are more generous."<sup>4</sup> Number 3: I need the church because I need to see others differently. It all came down to salvation for her. Her salvation is all wrapped up in the salvation of others and as she put it, "I need mercy and forgiveness so much more than I need self-righteousness."<sup>5</sup>

Friends we need each other, and we need the church. And we are the church. This is where we find our belonging. We are one in our calling in our relationship to Christ. And this belonging, as Paul reminds us, affects who we are going to be among one another and how we are going to be. The Spirit calls us to a greater unity and common purpose. Our belonging to God must be more than to our human leaders or traditions, ideologies, moral attitudes or affinity groups. There are many things we subscribe to but there is one thing we belong to. For we are God's servants, working together, God's field, you and me, brother and sister, neighbor and stranger, even with all of our differences, all of our gifts and varied roles and God is working alongside of us. Thanks be to God for the courage and grace. Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> Bolz-Weber, Nadia. "God With Us In the Chaos Worship and Plenary." Annual Conference of the Association of Presbyterian Church Educators. Denver, CO. 25 January 2017.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.