

Plant a Radish, Get a Radish

A Sermon Preached by the
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May 17, 2009
Oak Grove Presbyterian Church
Bloomington, Minnesota

1 Corinthians 3:1-9
John 15:9-17

If you've sung in a high school or community theater production any time in the last forty years, you're probably familiar with the words of the sermon title, "Plant a Radish, Get a Radish." It's a song from a wonderful little musical called "The Fantasticks" that opened in New York at an off Broadway theater in 1960 – which is, I know, well before many of you were born. It ran continuously for forty-two years, 17,162 performances, at the Sullivan Street Playhouse in Greenwich Village, until it closed early in 2002. Less than five years later, it reopened on Broadway and is still playing to packed houses, who still go home singing its best-known song, "Try to Remember."

It's a simple story – a love story – with all of the usual characters, and then some. There's a boy and a girl, a hero and a villain. And then there are two fathers, two gardens, and a wall that separates them. In the second act, one of my favorite songs is sung by the fathers as they're tending their gardens and talking over the wall about the joys and risks of raising children.

It goes like this – and don't worry, I'm not going to sing. "Plant a radish, get a radish, never any doubt. That's why I love vegetables, you know what you're about. Plant a turnip, get a turnip, maybe you'll get two. That's why I love vegetables, you know that they'll come through."

It goes on . . . "They're dependable, they're befriendable, they're the best pal a parent's ever known. While with children, it's bewildering, you don't know until the seed is nearly grown, just what you've sown."

A lot of you have already been in the garden, or have at least started seedlings under lights in the basement or in a sunny kitchen window, dreaming about the crop of peas or zucchini or tomatoes that make summer in Minnesota worth all of the winter in Minnesota. And whether you're planting sweet peas or radishes, you pretty much know that, save for the renegade seed in the packet, you can plant radishes and expect to get radishes, you can plant sweet peas and they'll climb right up the fence as sweet peas!

Not surprisingly, the church is not exactly like that. Sometimes you think you're planting radishes and you get carrots. Now if you like carrots, that's great, but if not, it can feel like a wasted effort. Interim Pastors are used to planting radishes and getting carrots, and we usually don't mind at all. I'm a person who thinks, for example, that one of the best things about raising children, unlike vegetables, is the unpredictability of it all. There's another line in the song that goes, "Every turnip green, every kidney bean, every plant grows according to the plot. But with progeny, it's hodge-podgeny, for as soon as you think you know what kind you've got – it's what they're not."

That's the fun part of what we do together as the church! We may want things to grow according to the plot, but it's really a lot more interesting and a lot more fun to watch it unfold into

something entirely unexpected and wonderful. Sort of like cucumbers on a lilac bush – and you may have to pick up a copy of last week’s sermon to catch up on that one!

Now what about those cranky folks at the church in Corinth that Paul was writing to? What kind of seeds were they sowing? You’ll remember that the Corinthian church was not without its share of challenges – and you know that’s just a more polite word for problems. Paul had already spent a long time in Corinth establishing the church, about a year and a half according to the story in Acts, about the length of an interim pastorate. He left Corinth and traveled throughout the region, in a ministry of evangelism, “strengthening all of the disciples,” we are told, finally coming back to Ephesus, where he heard about the problems in Corinth.

Crossing paths with Paul was a man named Apollos, a Jew from Alexandria, who is described in Acts as “an eloquent man, well-versed in the scriptures.” We are told that he had been “instructed in the Way of the Lord,” that he spoke with “burning enthusiasm and taught accurately the things concerning Jesus.” Apollos first came to Ephesus, where he was mentored by Priscilla and Aquila, and then went to Corinth, where he was warmly received by the growing community of believers in that city.

It seems that some of the conflict in Corinth was centered on the various factions that were emerging, each one allying itself with a different leader, including both Paul and Apollos, as well as Peter. Paul relentlessly reminds them in this epistle that the church, that gathered community of believers, belongs to God. The leaders are merely servants of God’s larger purpose. It is foolish, then, even destructive and dangerous, to choose sides. And Paul poses the question: “What then is Apollos? What is Paul?”

As Paul develops the image, they are field hands, given the chores of planting and cultivating, each one simply doing the task assigned by God. The one who plants and the one waters are two sides of the same coin. Without the planter, there would be no crop to water. Without the cultivator, the crop would die. They may finally be limited in their usefulness, but they are both important to the growing process.

Gardening is hard work – just like abiding, by the way. And some of us are better gardeners than others. But all of us have a vested interest in the harvest. And all of us need to be in the fields, doing whatever it is that we do best, whether it’s planting or watering or weeding or harvesting.

We’ve spent the last year and a bit together, and certainly you spent time prior to my arrival, planting and watering and fertilizing and weeding. Interim ministry is a time to turn the ground over, to dig deep into the soil of a congregation’s history and remember what it is about this congregation that makes it faithful and loving and joyful, and the place that you want to call home. It’s also a time to throw some things onto the compost pile where they can become part of a more productive life cycle. Remember that fourth question, “What do we need to stop doing?” Keep asking it. And it’s a time to water and weed and tend the garden, as we wait for the first signs of new life.

Now that we’ve come to the end of our time together, and are already looking ahead to the next stage, it’s helpful to think about what’s been planted and where we see signs of new life in this garden we call Oak Grove. The danger in going down that path is that I will undoubtedly overlook something that you’ve been watering and weeding, so I’ll make that disclaimer right up front! There’s just not time this morning to name and lift up every single program in the church, but that doesn’t mean I haven’t noticed the extraordinary effort.

Let's begin with the littlest sprouts. Have you looked in the nursery lately on a Sunday morning? It's full of lively babies and toddlers, some of them happy, some of them not so happy, but all of them lovingly and tenderly cared for by Karen Hill and our nursery volunteers.

Our children's Christian Education program, under Carol's wonderful guidance and leadership, is growing by leaps and bounds. If you were here last Sunday and had the chance to go to the open house in the Sunday School rooms, you saw children engaged in a wide variety of activities, from cooking to planting to making felt flowers for Mother's Day. This spring, our Wednesday evening Logos program averaged sometimes as many as 100 people for Bonnie's fabulous dinners and the after-dinner activities, including education for children, youth and adults, and weekly choir rehearsal. If you haven't made Wednesday night part of your weekly church time, think about joining when Logos and choir practice start again in the fall.

Thanks to Judy and Nancy and the Oak Grove choir, amazing music, Spring Musicals, handbells, and the Oak Grove orchestra all bring such joy to our worship services and give glory to God; and remember that all God's critters got a place in the choir, so there's place for you if that's what makes your heart sing.

Last week, we welcomed five new confirmands, and we have seven youth right behind them in the Seekers program. Thanks to Carol and Dries, our teachers and Covenant Partners, our middle school program is thriving. In just a couple of weeks, you'll have the chance to commission our senior high youth as they leave for a mission trip to Chicago, once again with our youth director, Neal Greimel at the helm. We are so blessed to have all of these young adults in our midst. Our baptismal promise to them was to help them grow in their faith and welcome them into the full fellowship of this community. In turn, their reaffirmation of their baptismal vows included the promise to fully participate in the life of Oak Grove in whatever ways work best for them at this particular stage of their life. We hold each other accountable to those promises.

Adult Education has brought us a wide variety of Sunday morning speakers and programs, opportunities for Bible study, the Blue Couch Ministry, and the February Forum, which extended our mission to the Bloomington community with the Saturday youth event with Naomi Tutu. Through Dries' tireless efforts with community agencies and the City of Bloomington, we have opened the building to programs like Homework Connection and will expand that program to include a summer option at one of the city parks. Dries has also been instrumental in developing a partnership with the Muslim community and helping us find ways to welcome our newest neighbors who have immigrated to this country and who now call Bloomington home. We are so grateful for those who now call Oak Grove home, so blessed by the gifts that they bring to our community.

Mission and outreach has always been a hallmark of this congregation, and we continue to make it a priority both with our financial support and volunteer hours.

We continue to maintain and care for this beautiful building, and unless you've been on the Building and Operations Committee, you have no idea what a big job that is! We completed the remodeling of three rooms in the old education wing, which are now used for committee meetings, small groups, informal conversation, individual study, and adult education. The gardens have never been more beautiful, even the ones that wish they had a little more sun.

A lot goes on behind the scenes that you probably never even know about. Budget and Finance and Personnel have labored long and hard this year to put procedures and policies in place to insure that our finances are in good order and our staff in good spirits. And you know what a wonderful staff you have here at Oak Grove.

Not everything is coming up roses, of course. We have had our share of financial challenges, and we are still facing a significant deficit in the budget. Every committee in the church has been asked to reduce their spending, which in many cases, results in the need for more volunteer hours. That part of our life together is going to take a little more time and attention, a little more watering and fertilizing before we see much new growth. But think about how much hope there is in a seed, and with every gift another seed is planted for the future of this church.

The garden is still coming up, we have done good work. And there is work yet to do. In many places, we don't know exactly what will emerge. But you have put good energy into the soil, and you have taken care of what you've planted. If you remember the story about Frog and Toad and their garden, you have read stories to the seeds, and sung songs to them, and loved them into being. When they start to blossom and put forth fruit, you can be happy and contented gardeners. When the unexpected happens, when the cucumbers climb the lilac tree and what you thought were daffodils turn out to be onions, don't be discouraged. Receive it all with joy.

Pay attention to Paul's words. We can plant and we can water, but only God gives the growth. Trust that God is in the new growth of this congregation and be open to surprise. You can still plant radishes and expect to get radishes, but sometimes the grace is in the hodge-podgeny of it all.

This is about the point in the sermon where I'm thinking, "Big finish!" It's also the point in the sermon where my daughter would advise "landing" it, knowing that the "big finish" would probably take me another direction. So, I'm going to land it with this blessing from the Franciscans that you can carry with you as you turn the page to the next chapter:

May God bless you with a restless discomfort about easy answers, half-truths and superficial relationships, so that you may seek truth boldly and love deep within your heart.

May God bless you with holy anger at injustice, oppression and exploitation of people, so that you may tirelessly work for justice, freedom, and peace among all people.

May God bless you with the gift of tears to shed with those who suffer from pain, rejection, starvation, or the loss of all that they cherish, so that you may reach out your hand to comfort them and transform their pain into joy.

May God bless you with enough foolishness to believe that you really can make a difference in this world, so that you are able, with God's grace, to do what others claim cannot be done. Amen.