

“A Common Purpose” / I Corinthians 3:1-9 / 16 February 2014

“You're God's field, God's garden. The one who plants and the one who waters have a common purpose. God alone creates life. God alone sets off that original spark of energy that all of life is. But then, God confides to us the joyful task of nurturing life, whether plant life, or animal, or human, or even the life of the spirit. We are called to participate with God in tending the garden of this world.

Many years ago, I lived in an ancient apartment building in a shabby neighborhood close to downtown Oklahoma City. Aside from being unable to afford anything nicer, I chose that apartment because it reminded me a little bit of home. It was in a tall, yellow brick building that towered majestically above a treeless, low-lying city of one-story bungalows. Best of all, there were two big locust trees out front, a true rarity in that town. It looked and felt like a tiny piece of Brooklyn—the nice part—that got accidentally dropped down in the wrong location, there in the center of an ugly city on the high plains. Like houses back here in my native territory, it had glass doorknobs and stately woodwork. The apartments were long and narrow, mysterious and a little bit dark. They gave the illusion of being very large, though they were not. Down the hall from me, there lived a talkative old woman whose crowded apartment looked like something from a picture book by Maurice Sendak. It was packed full of antiques, and those decorative trinkets of another age. Mostly, it had houseplants. She had no pets, but she adored her houseplants, and her place was a virtual indoor forest. Every narrow ray of sunlight that found its way past the locust trees and into her apartment was crammed with vines, and stalks, and bushy leaves. There was something almost tropical about the place. One vining plant had overtaken almost an entire wall of her sitting room. And since the doors were thin, I would very often hear her talking to her plants with great affection as she cared for them. To her credit, she didn't “baby talk” to them, but her tone was loving and gentle. And she called her plants by name, though I have long since forgotten what those names were. “There now, Lady Marie, did that plant fertilizer make you feel better? Here now, let's move you over into the light for just a day.”

Not only did my neighbor love her houseplants, but she used to fill my apartment with plants, too. “Happy New Year, Brian. Here's are some babies off my spiderplant. I'll tell you how to take care of them.” “Happy Fourth of July, Brian. Now, this is a Christmas cactus; you should have flowers by December.” My neighbor once told me that she wanted to move to a less troubled neighborhood, a place where she didn't wake to every sound in the night, but she'd moved a lot of these plants before, and they didn't like it. They moped about the move for months. Truly, if there'd been a fire in the house, I suspect she would have risked her life to rescue her begonias.

I often wondered what life might have been like for my neighbor lady if only she'd had a garden of her own, or even just a little patio where she could cultivate her own plants from seed. She got so much joy, even companionship, from philodendrons and African violets and Boston ferns. Hers was the joy of nurturing life. The mystery of caring for another living thing. If you've ever gazed into the face of your own child, or taken in a kitten, or spent your years with a dog, or even a parakeet; if you've ever grown a plant, a real, living thing, with your own hands, aware that it was fully reliant on you for its well-being, then you know how it is. The life comes from outside of us. We cannot create it. Indeed, we can practically watch it slipping between our fingers, always eluding our grasp. No, we can never truly own it. But we can love it. We can tend it. The joyful task of stewarding life falls to us. We can admire it and help it to grow.

“You're God's field, God's garden. We're just laborers with a common purpose.” One of the reasons I don't often preach from the Epistles is that they're so complex. Here's a good example: Paul's analogy is that we are God's field, but in the same analogy, we are also the laborers who are charged with the task of tending that field. The Apostle Paul writes these words to his faraway friends in the church at Corinth. He's scolding them, really, because they've embraced different theologies—different creeds—and they've divided themselves up into factions. One follows after this theology, and another embraces that theology, and yet another follows after a whole different theology. Of course, there's nothing wrong with that. It's said that wherever you have half a dozen Presbyterians, you've got eight

or nine mutually contradictory theologies—which means that several of them hold more than one creed at once. But instead of living and letting live, as we do around here, the Corinthians are choosing to dwell on their differences. Paul reminds them that, yes, he and Apollos do things a little differently. Their beliefs aren't exactly the same. But they're just laborers in God's field, and it is God alone who causes our spirits (and our churches) to grow. God takes delight in making us grow, for life is God's alone. Yours and mine is the joyous task of tending it...which means not smothering it, which means accepting it, allowing it to change and grow.

In this handful-and-a-half of decades that we're given, one of our greatest temptations is to stifle the growth of those lives within our care. We stunt their development because we don't like the direction they're taking, or because we think they'll be safer if we control them. We stifle them, too, because we just don't want to admit that the world is changing, that we are growing older. Somehow, we think, if we can just keep things the same, then we will be safe from the vicissitudes of life.

If you've ever been to our home, perhaps for the Christmas open house, you may have noticed pencil marks on the low wall beneath the main staircase, at the back end of the entry hall. Right beside the short little door that leads to the basement steps, there's a spot on the wall where, lo, these past four Novembers, I've measured out Chloe and Greta's heights in pencil. We moved here in the summer of 2010, and it was the first time in my life that I occupied a piece of real estate where I was free to make pencil marks on a wall—or any other permanent alterations, for that matter. I'd received not one but exactly three tape measures the preceding Christmas, and though all three of them have long since gone missing, I decided to put them to good use by measuring the kids' height annually, until the day when they go away to college. My heart aches when I look at the earliest pencil marks, around Thanksgiving 2010, how tiny they both were! They've put on more than eight inches since then, while I wasn't looking. Time can seem to pass so slowly, as we're plugging away at the daily grind, meeting deadlines, or failing to meet them, going to meetings, commuting to work, church, the store. Life can seem to drift by slowly, when the winter is long, and the days are much alike. But if we would pause from our busyness every now and again, there are times when we would almost feel the earth moving beneath our feet, on its endless, forward-marching, circular journey. Time passes. All things change and grow. As hard as it is to accept change, it would be selfish and shortsighted to try to stop it, not to mention futile.

And yet, what a privilege, what a joy, to be given a part in that great, forward-marching drama of life. Each of us is created for the joyful chore of helping to nurture life into its fullness. We cannot create; we can only steward it, but oh, when we do! When we step back to look at the good growth of the life that's been entrusted to our care, there's nothing like it. The worst thing we could do is to try to stunt the growth of those things and people we love. The changing seasons of their life, its mutability—these are the things that make the moments sweet and precious. Besides, just as the best seasons must pass away from our grasp, so too the worst seasons pass. None of them is eternal. We're all getting tired of winter, but you can feel its changing even now. The light lingers longer into the evening. It illuminates corners of our homes and hearts that have been dark since the fall of 2013. This changing light! It fades into gray. It changes our perspective on things we thought we knew. But it always comes back around.

“You are God's field, God's garden. The one who plants and the one who waters have a common purpose.” And what is their purpose? It's to care for things, to care for people, as they journey through life's changes. It's to nurture the garden of faith, so that it can shelter us, provide for us, give us a home amid all the world's changes.

Of course, some changes are downright unwelcome. Two elderly couples used to go out every Thursday for dinner at the Golden Coral at about 4:40pm. They'd been doing it for years, though they used to go at 7pm when they were a little younger. As they were talking and laughing, one of the men tried to tell the others about a different restaurant that he and his wife had recently tried. “Oh, it was fantastic,” the man said. “I wish I could remember the name of the place!” He paused to think for a

moment, frustrated by the erosion of his short term memory. Finally he said to the other man, “What is the flower that smells just as sweet by any other name?” His friend said, “A rose?” “Yes, that’s it,” the forgetful man replied. Then he looked over at his wife and said, “Rose, what’s the name of that new restaurant?” Some changes are most unwelcome, like the loss of memory, or strength, or ability. Death is usually, but not always, unwelcome.

Some people can’t welcome changes in their life of faith because, to them, faith is the one thing—the *one* thing!—that ought to remain changeless in a world of endless flux. “God doesn’t change,” they reason, “and if *even faith* is subject to change, then nothing is safe.” I can sympathize with that kind of thinking, can’t you? We spend so much energy in our private lives just searching for places of safety and solace, escapes from all the changeableness of our world. I can understand those folks who collapse gratefully into the arms of the church and expect, here, to find a comfortable sameness. I have probably done it myself from time to time. And yet, hasn’t this happened to most of us? A headline catches us off guard and sparks a deep sadness in our hearts; the doctor has bad news; someone we love fares poorly; or the old faith we love just begins to ring hollow somehow. We don’t want to let go of it because it’s meant so much. When faith tries to change and grow, we always fear that our faith is dying, that it’s going away. But faith, like all living things, must be allowed to mature. This is one of the hardest lessons of all to learn. When people feel their faith changing, they very often grip it all the more tightly, stifling it, smothering it, stunting its growth into something ugly, thwarting it in a way that they would never do to a puppy, or a houseplant, or a child. When grownups cling to their elementary school faith, refusing to let it grow into maturity—well—that’s how we get fundamentalists, and terrorists, and all the worst kinds of religion that you see parodied on TV.

But, oh, the joy of tending to a life as it grows and matures—any life, really, including a life of faith! The Apostle Paul calls the Corinthians “infants” for not allowing others to believe and behave differently from themselves, for insisting on a kind of uniformity that God never intended for humanity. Surely an acceptance of the beliefs and practices of others is a mark of spiritual maturity, proof that one is not threatened by the wondrous diversity that God instilled in the faithful of all stripes.

“You are God’s field, God’s garden,” Paul says. God alone creates life, but you and I are invited to participate with God in nurturing life. It’s a task that each of us longs for, in our own way. My long-ago neighbor with her jungle of houseplants didn’t have the vocabulary to name it, but she wanted nothing more than to help cultivate the big garden of this world. Last summer, our congregation created the Sandi Mason Memorial Garden, which literally produced more than 300 pounds of food for the needy. Some deliver produce to the North Side or to the women’s shelter. Some knit scarves to benefit Family Promise. Some make music. Some usher, or teach, or serve on committees. All of it is participation with God in nurturing all that is alive, and good, and growing in this world. Part of what it means to find your life’s calling, part of what it means to live out your faith, to find joy and a sense of purpose, is to discover the ways that you can best take part in tending God’s garden. No, we cannot manufacture it, but we are all created for the task of caring for life. Amen.