

Nearer God's Heart: Church Gardening as a Christian Practice

by

Pamela Dolan

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_____ Date _____
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Introduction

In March of 2014, my parish broke ground for a church garden we called Shepherd Farm. We chose a 30' x 90' plot on the far side of the church building, visible from the road but not taking too much out of our five-acre property, surrounded it with a deer fence, and got to work. Eight to ten core volunteers gardened regularly throughout the spring, summer, and fall. It was not a big group, but was significant percentage of the parish: our average Sunday attendance that year was 65. According to the volunteer log book we kept on hand, another 40 or so people spent at least one hour each in the garden at some point during the season. By the end of October we had harvested 2,083 pounds of food, almost all of which was delivered to various hunger ministries. In our second season, in spite of more challenging weather conditions, we harvested slightly more: another 2,107 pounds of produce, also for the benefit of those in our community who are in need.

This project is made up of two parts. The creation and implementation of the garden itself is the first part; the three months spent planning and the following 14 months implementing the first vegetable garden in our parish history took up a sizeable portion of my time and energy as rector of Good Shepherd and taught me a great deal about parish dynamics and my own strengths and weaknesses as a parish priest. The second part is this thesis itself, a written record and analysis of what has been learned and what still merits further consideration.

In this thesis I will outline the story of the garden and analyze the impact of the garden on our parish through the lens of Christian practices. The first two years of Shepherd Farm were a resounding success, although it was not without its challenges, conflicts, and disappointments; documenting this process from concept to completion provides the skeleton of this thesis. Additionally I include some analysis of the process, including insights and questions that arise only in retrospect and with the added benefit of extensive reading done in the academic areas of agrarianism, religion and the environment, and spiritual practices. My research also includes the results of a parish survey and follow-up interviews conducted after the second season of the garden was complete.

The principal claim arising from this research and analysis is that caring for Shepherd Farm, our church garden, became a central practice of our congregation's faith, forming and defining our community in positive and life-giving ways. This practice brought to the forefront of our common life several other important practices, especially discernment, hospitality, and what can broadly be called "community shaping." Our experience suggests that other churches could have similar results: by approaching church gardening as a Christian practice, a congregation can find in the garden a place of formation and a catalyst for transformation, as well as experiencing growth in other practices in their common life. Given that we live in a context of great anxiety about the shrinking size of the church, of our denomination, and of individual congregations, our experience is also significant for other congregations because it shows that even a small

parish can participate meaningfully in what is a growing and important movement, that is, the development of church-based farms and gardens.¹

It will be clear from the chapters that follow that in the implementation and analysis of the garden I utilized the “action-reflection-response” model, as opposed to working from the assumption that shared beliefs were necessary before any action could be taken. This approach is not unconcerned with issues of justice and sustainability, nor is it anti-intellectual or anti-theological. Rather, it is pragmatic in nature and is consistent with the meaning and purpose of Christian practices as defined by Craig Dyckra and Dorothy C. Bass: “Christian practices are the human activities in and through which people cooperate with God in addressing the needs of one another and creation.”² In this approach I have also attended to the distinction between a “cosmological strategy” and a “pragmatic strategy” as defined by Willis Jenkins. I am especially persuaded by his distinctive understanding of the problem of Christianity and culture. He argues that

Christian social ethics arises from missional projects that bear and respond to the world’s problems as their own. Doing so, Christian ethics does not sanction industrial powers or submit to market relations; it rather opens those powers and relations to different uses by inventing ways to live faithfully within them. By bearing responsibility for emerging problems of human power, the church learns to sustain the practices that carry its faith [...]. In other words, the

¹ For a sense of how widespread this movement is, the Episcopal Asset Map lists 171 community gardens located in Episcopal churches and schools around the country. This list is by no means exhaustive. See <http://www.episcopalassetmap.org/>. Another excellent resource is the Christian Food Movement Guide, available for download from <http://www.churchwork.com/christian-food-movement/>.

² Craig Dyckra and Dorothy C. Bass, “A Theological Understanding of Christian Practices,” in *Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life*, ed. Miroslav Volf and Dorothy C. Bass (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2002), 22.

church sustains its unique sociality precisely by taking seriously the world's problems.³

By no stretch of the imagination do I qualify as an ethicist, but I see in Jenkins' argument strong support for the seriousness of this project and justification for our pragmatic approach. The garden at Good Shepherd is a clear example of a local church community choosing to "bear and respond" to the problem of hunger and food insecurity as our own (elsewhere Jenkins uses the term "wounds" for "problems," which strikes me as especially apt). I believe this project will show that by "bearing responsibility" for this problem we have indeed learned "to sustain the practices that carry our faith." And of course there is a circularity or complementarity to this dynamic: our church is learning to sustain these practices, in the face of our own incompetence and insufficiencies, while at the same time we are learning how profoundly the practices sustain us.

From the ground of lived experience and theological reflection, some preliminary claims about the spiritual benefits of church gardening will grow. I note that these claims can only be modest and contingent, which I believe is appropriate for the scope of this project and also inherent to the nature of parish ministry, where the story is always unfolding and rarely provides a straightforward trajectory. The foundational concern at all times will be to explore how our congregation has been formed and transformed by gardening, with a secondary focus on what this might suggest for other congregations interested in undertaking a similar journey. Spiritual growth is not easily tracked or quantified; it can, however, be glimpsed in stories and reflections. These stories and

³ Willis Jenkins, *The Future of Ethics: Sustainability, Social Justice, and Religious Creativity* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2013), 72.

reflections are gleaned from my own experience and observation as well as from the surveys and interviews completed by parishioners.

What follows this brief introduction are four chapters and a conclusion. The first chapter explores the overall concept of Christian practices in much more depth than I attempt here in the introduction. The next three chapters each focus on a single practice; perhaps in an unconscious homage to the famed three-legged stool of Anglicanism, these chapters all begin with Scripture, move on to the realm of tradition (in the sense of how discernment, hospitality, and “community shaping” can be understood as spiritual practices within the Christian tradition), and then consider our own congregation’s experience with each practice. The project’s overall structure has a linear and chronological shape to it, as it follows the course of the Shepherd Farm garden from idea to implementation to growth and impact. This helps explain the focus on these three particular practices, when of course any number of practices could be shown to relate to church gardening in interesting and even important ways. Additionally, these practices—and therefore, to some degree, the chapters—are intertwined and overlapping. This gets to the very nature of practices—they are interrelated, each one supporting and influencing the other. As Dykstra and Bass put it, “In real life, it is very hard to separate the practices. They flow into one another, each one making a space for God’s active presence that then ripples out into other parts of life. [...] Thus focusing on even a single practice can lead you into a new way of life.”⁴ It makes sense, therefore, that a process of discernment led our community to embrace gardening as a means of practicing hospitality, which in turn

⁴ Craig Dykstra and Dorothy C. Bass, “Times of Yearning, Practices of Faith,” in *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People*, 2nd ed., ed. Dorothy C. Bass (San Francisco, CA: Josey-Bass, 2010), 10-11.

helped us to discern how much our community already valued and was practicing hospitality. Gardening then strengthened our hospitality “muscle” even more, which in turn led us to new opportunities to expand and shape our community. And so it goes, as the following chapters will illustrate.

Chapter One

Understanding Christian Practices

In this chapter I explore current understandings of “practice” as a communal, repeated, long-term complex of actions employed by members of a faith community that move the individuals and the community so employed into deeper levels of spiritual growth and engagement. I then argue for the inclusion of church gardening as a Christian practice, using our experience at Shepherd Farm as a primary source of examples.

A. What do we mean by “Christian practices”?

In their seminal work on the subject of Christian practices, Craig Dykstra and Dorothy C. Bass define those practices as “things Christian people do together over time to address fundamental needs and conditions of humanity and all creation in the light of and in response to God’s active presence for the life of the world in Jesus Christ.”⁵ It is significant that they use the term “Christian practices” consistently over similar terms like “spiritual practices” or even “spiritual disciplines.” While I appreciate the word “discipline” because of its etymological connection to the concepts of discipleship and learning, it can sound harsh and forbidding to the modern ear, as if the church is promising (or threatening) to whip people into spiritual shape. The aversion likely to be caused by this word can be easily avoided by use of the word “practice” in its place. It, too, has a web of connotations that may need to be unpacked over time,⁶ but at least it is a

⁵ Craig Dykstra and Dorothy C. Bass, “A Way of Thinking about a Way of Life” in *Practicing Our Faith*, 204.

⁶ Dykstra and Bass, “A Way of Thinking,” 206.

common, unthreatening word that does not require a great deal of explanation to be understood by the non-specialist.

Dykstra and Bass do not make explicit their rationale for using the word “Christian” instead of “spiritual,” but I have chosen to adopt it for this project for a few simple reasons. The most obvious one is that I am examining the use of a particular practice, gardening, within a distinctly Christian context: the local parish. Although we sometimes refer to it as a “community garden,” the garden we call Shepherd Farm is more truly a church garden—it utilizes church land, church money, and the bodies and time of members of our congregation. Beyond that, our motivation for engaging in the practice of church gardening was specifically Christian, not more broadly spiritual: when the garden started, we saw ourselves as heeding the call set forth in Matthew 25 to feed the hungry; we were not looking for spiritual benefits for ourselves or anticipating spiritual growth as an outcome. The group effort required for a garden of this size also pushes against the usual understanding of “spiritual” as primarily an individual concern rather than a community issue.

Regrettably, the term “Christian practice” could be seen as exclusionary and might also be deemed inaccurate when used for a practice like yoga that did not originate with Christianity or within Christian communities. For that reason, I sometimes use the term “faith practice” when I am addressing a broader audience. It avoids the implied individualism and interiority of the word “spiritual” but acknowledges that people of different faiths can be motivated to similar practices and that faith communities engaged in such practices can derive similar benefits from them. However, for the sake of this project, which focuses on Christianity, and more specifically one Episcopal congregation,

“Christian practice” will refer to any practice that is performed by Christians and that otherwise meets the criteria of the definition set forth by Dykstra and Bass: it is something done, not just talked about; it meets one or more of the fundamental needs of humanity and creation; and it is responsive to God’s presence in the world. This project will make the argument that church gardening is in fact a Christian practice, and further that approaching it as such strengthens other Christian practices already being undertaken by the parish.

B. Gardens as Practice

Gardening as such was not among the Christian practices listed in the original edition of *Practicing Our Faith*, but it does make a brief appearance in the preface to the Revised Edition. Bass suggests that caring for creation should probably be seen as a distinct practice, rather than falling under the larger category of household economics. Indeed they added the phrase “and creation” to the basic definition of Christian practice. In a related insight, Bass writes about “breaking bread” as an emerging area of concern and intentional practice:

This book is not at all responsible for the emergence of this concern. However, Christian resources for renewing the practice that addresses this area of fundamental need are exceptionally rich, and some readers have made powerful connections that bring the approach developed here to the search for better ways of growing and sharing food.⁷

From there, she goes on briefly to describe how gardens might be part of this emerging concern, and also uses gardening as a metaphor to describe how Christian practices work.

⁷ Bass, “New Preface for the Revised Edition” in *Practicing Our Faith*, xvi.

It is crucial to my project that gardening itself be understood as a Christian practice. What follows for the rest of this chapter is a brief consideration of how building and growing a church garden meets criteria of a Christian practice as outlined by Dykstra and Bass, since it corresponds closely to both the definition itself and to the majority of the twelve attributes they list as part of their expanded definition.

First, I will break down the basic definition: “Christian practices are things Christian people do together over time to address fundamental needs and conditions of humanity and all creation in the light of and in response to God’s active presence for the life of the world in Jesus Christ.”

1. Church gardens are “things Christian people *do together*.” The level of cooperation within a group that is necessary to work a garden successfully makes this first part of the definition of practice especially relevant. A church garden of any significant size requires a team of gardeners, and while it is possible to work in the garden individually, the effort must be coordinated or it can be counterproductive and even harmful. At Shepherd Farm we found that regular communication between gardeners was an essential ingredient of our practice; it was the only way to avoid wasting water, seeds, time, and energy. In our case, we kept a log book in a waterproof case in the garden and asked people to sign in and keep track of what they did in the garden at each visit. Some of our gardeners preferred solitary time in the garden, but even when alone they were working as part of a team for all practical purposes. For instance, no one person or sub-group took responsibility for one type of plant or one plot; to the best of our abilities, we

were all responsible for the whole garden. At the end of the harvest no one person could say “I grew those turnips” or “I made those tomatoes possible”—rather, it was a group effort throughout. Many people only wanted to help in the garden when they knew there would be others there gardening as well. In part that was a way of learning the practice, much the same way as one might learn to pray by joining a prayer group or even by showing up for worship regularly. In part, too, the fellowship of shared work held its own appeal. The garden became a place of storytelling and getting to know one another. We shared hopes and fears along with our sunscreen and hand tools.

2. Church gardens are “things Christian people do together *over time*.” At the risk of stating the obvious, a garden takes time. Plants do not grow overnight, nor does a successful harvest occur without significant time spent planting, weeding, watering, and in other ways tending to the garden. Once an investment of time and other resources has been put into creating a church garden, it is likely that congregations will choose to continue the garden from year to year. Those of us who live in climates where active gardening is not a year-round activity nonetheless find that we spend time in non-gardening months thinking about and planning our gardens. We also learn that gardens can shape our sense of time; they cannot be hurried, nor can pressing garden work be put off for a later date or a more convenient time. Plants need what care they need when they need it. Church gardening is not a Sunday-only activity, which is crucial to its formative power. Members have to come back to church during the week to tend the garden, even if they share a schedule and take turns with the garden activities.

A year of gardening is just a year of gardening—it is not quite the same thing as *having* a garden, which is something that reappears spring after spring after spring. With many church programs today, spending a “whole year” on something feels like a very long time. Our congregation engaged in a prayer and evangelism series that last almost two full years. At the end of it, many people could not remember what the title of our second year was called. Obviously we had failed to let it sink in or in some other way make a major difference. At the end of our first gardening season, by contrast, those who had participated in the garden were eager to figure out what to continue and what to change for the next season. Even people who had not participated in it worked from the assumption that the garden would continue for another year or more. In this way gardening is closer to our most fundamental Christian practices, like prayer or the Eucharist, than to most church programs or enterprises. There is an even longer-scale issue of time at work in church gardens, as well. While vegetable gardens at church may feel new or even trendy, there is a long history of gardens and small-scale agriculture on church property. This “trend” is therefore more accurately understood as an older model of stewardship of the land or a reclaiming of our tradition. Of course church gardens do not take us back in time, but they do connect us to our past and, ideally, demonstrate an intentional connection to our future.

3. Church gardens address “*fundamental needs and conditions of human beings and all creation.*” Clearly hunger is a fundamental human need; arguably it is *the* fundamental human need. For the purposes of this project, the only kind of gardening being considered is vegetable gardening—gardening that creates food for

others. Gardens for many other purposes abound, some of them on church grounds; these gardens include ornamental gardens, medicinal or herbal gardens, memorial gardens, and prayer or meditation gardens. A garden maintained for a purpose other than growing food would have a different impact on its community, perhaps meeting different needs such as the need for beauty, Sabbath time, and so on. The motivation for the creation of Shepherd Farm, as will be explored in more detail in later sections, focused primarily on a deep concern for the problem of hunger and food insecurity, and what our church could do to meet a fundamental need for people in our community.

Additionally, church gardens address a fundamental need and condition of all creation, not just of humanity, in that they can be part of a movement that is seeking to address the myriad environmental and health concerns created by industrial agriculture.⁸ They can utilize sustainable methods and work from a philosophy that prioritizes care for creation over unrealistic productivity quotients or market competition. They are not, as a rule, driven by profit margins. The fundamental need for all creation to be treated respectfully and as part of an interconnected web of life can be met by responsible church gardens, as will be discussed more in Chapter Four. In this way both human needs and the needs of the land are acknowledged and met by this particular Christian practice.

⁸ For a succinct account of the difference between agrarianism and industrialism, including some of this ills that result from the dominant position industrialism holds in our culture, see Wendell Berry, “The Agrarian Standard,” in *The Essential Agrarian Reader: The Future of Culture, Community, and the Land*, ed. Norman Wirzba (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2004), 23-33.

Although I did not understand this before I began gardening, there is a sense in which gardening meets a fundamental need for the gardener, as well as for the people fed by it and for creation. Human beings seem to need a connection to the land, a sense of feeling at home when they step outside their homes, schools, office buildings, and yes, churches. This is a spiritual need that has, I assume, always existed. Being at peace with the land is a critical part of God's *shalom* as expressed in the Psalms and other Old Testament texts.⁹ Agrarian writers argue, in different ways and with more or less explicitly religious convictions at work, that in today's world people are more cut off from this sense of being at home on the land than at any other time in human history. We have all heard stories of children who think you can grow cotton candy or adults who have no idea how to prepare and cook fresh vegetables, but the problem of alienation goes far beyond our appalling ignorance about food. Norman Wirzba does a fine job of laying out the problem:

One of the hallmarks of the modern and postmodern world that makes acquisition of such wisdom especially difficult [wisdom about the way the material world works] is our growing disillusionment and disenchantment with the world. Fueled by otherworldly attachments or by anxiety, boredom, and disaffection in the face of a valueless universe, we find fewer instances in which people deeply or responsibly love their bodies, their homes, or their habitats. [...] What is lacking is the sense of the abiding connection between ourselves and our worlds; because of this disconnection we cannot exercise the virtues of love (such as attention, patience, affection, resilience) that would enable us to be the caretakers of the world and ourselves that we should be.¹⁰

⁹ The work of Ellen F. Davis, especially in *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture: An Agrarian Reading of the Bible* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), in exploring this important theme will be discussed in more detail later.

¹⁰ Norman Wirzba, "Placing the Soul" in *The Essential Agrarian Reader*, 91-92.

Gardening is one of the easiest and most effective ways to acquire that wisdom, and so it meets that fundamental need as well: to feel comfortable outdoors, interacting with nature, and perhaps even to feel a certain level of competence in performing tasks that might once have been commonplace but that have come to be associated exclusively with specialized hobbies or fields of knowledge.

4. The final clause of the definition of Christian practices—“*in the light of and in response to God’s active presence for the life of the world in Jesus Christ*”—would have us consider the theology of church gardening. The strongest foundation for that can be found in the doctrine of creation, which is articulated especially helpfully by Norman Wirzba. He argues that understanding the world around us as “creation” rather than “nature” shapes our relationship to it and to God.

“Understood as creation,” he writes, the world is “the concrete expression of God’s hospitable love making room for what is not God to be and to flourish.”¹¹ Not surprisingly, he holds up gardening as one of the primary ways for human beings to cultivate and honor a right relationship with creation. He asserts that Scripture teaches us that God is a gardener and therefore when we garden we live more fully into our true identity as beings created in the image and likeness of God. In sum, “To be a gardener is to be involved in one of the most fundamental of human tasks, namely, the effort to understand human creatureliness as our life together with other creatures and God.”¹² This theology of creation as it shapes our understanding of

¹¹ Norman Wirzba, *Food and Faith: A Theology of Eating* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 7.

¹² Wirzba, *Food and Faith*, 36.

the importance of gardening is closely related to the earlier point about meeting a fundamental human need to feel at home on the land. If Christian practices have to be in part a response to “God’s active presence for the life of the world,” gardening meets that criterion in at least two ways: first by reminding us that without God’s ongoing presence life would cease to exist, and second by allowing us to participate in sustaining and nurturing creation, for the good of the earth and for the good of other people.

C. Gardening and the Basic Attributes of Christian Practices

Dykstra and Bass further list twelve basic attributes of Christian practices; most of these are readily applicable to church gardening.

1. The first simply adds to the above definition by tacking on the phrase “through practical human acts.”¹³ Gardening is both practical and active; it is also something human beings have done since very early on in our collective history, to the point where many people equate gardening with civilization. As Robert Pogue Harrison writes, “History without gardens would be a wasteland. A garden severed from history would be superfluous.”¹⁴ A related assertion Dykstra and Bass make is that a Christian practice “is historical” and that “it has arisen from the living traditions of Christian faith and has taken numerous forms in the past and in various cultures around the world, and it is able to adapt to carry living tradition into new

¹³ Dykstra and Bass, “A Way of Thinking,” 204. The complete list is found on pages 204 and 205.

¹⁴ Robert Pogue Harrison, “Preface,” in *Gardens: An Essay on the Human Condition*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2008), x.

times and places.”¹⁵ Harrison’s book about gardens as cultural artifacts of human care and attention is a testimonial to how accurately this criterion relates to gardens in general, as well as to church gardens in particular. He writes about both secular and religious gardens as they have influenced literature and culture for several centuries. Nor does he confine himself to Europe and America, for he also considers Japanese Zen gardens. Another book of equally rich cultural scope and historical breadth is David Brown’s *God and Enchantment of Place*, which has a chapter comparing Christian, Buddhist, and Islamic gardens over the course of several centuries.¹⁶ Gardens as symbols, as literary tropes, and as actual places are profoundly important to nearly every culture across the globe and throughout human history. As Fred Bahnson puts it, “The garden is our oldest metaphor.”¹⁷ To create and maintain a garden, to cultivate the land in an intentional manner, whether at church or elsewhere, is to participate in a profoundly adaptive living tradition.

2. Dykstra and Bass further assert that a Christian practice is “thought-full: each practice relies on distinctive wisdom, knowledge, virtues, and skills, and doing the practice well over time nurtures the wisdom, knowledge, virtues, and skills on which the practice relies.”¹⁸ Gardening, while deceptively simple in some ways, certainly requires technical knowledge and skills. Had Good Shepherd not had a

¹⁵ Dykstra and Bass, “A Way of Thinking,” 205.

¹⁶ David Brown, “Widening the Perspective: Mosque and Temple, Sport and Garden,” in *God and Enchantment of Place: Reclaiming Human Experience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 350-403.

¹⁷ Fred Bahnson, *Soil and Sacrament: A Spiritual Memoir of Food and Faith* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2013), 8.

¹⁸ Dykstra and Bass, “A Way of Thinking,” 205.

few seasoned gardeners in the congregation it would have been much more difficult to create and sustain a successful garden. Even with our internal experienced guides in place we found ourselves reaching out to external sources of knowledge, such as the Missouri Botanical Garden and even gardening books. All of the skills necessary to garden on a large scale are rarely found in one person, so part of our church gardening process involved identifying the right people in our congregation and community as various skills were needed. The community of gardeners we created became something of an ecosystem itself, with one person's skill or knowledge filling in the gaps when another person's fell short. Wisdom and virtue are cultivated in a garden as well as produce. We focused on thrift and economy, for example in our use of water: we had children bring in used plastic one-gallon milk jugs when their families were finished with them, and taught them how to turn the jugs into a drip irrigation system for our tomato plants. We spent some of our grant money on purchasing two large rainwater collection drums to conserve water. These are just two examples of how wisdom and virtue were both practiced in our garden and also passed along to all who gardened there, especially the younger generations and those new to gardening.

Gardening may be the ultimate exemplar of a practice that utilizes, nurtures, and teaches skills, knowledge, virtue, and wisdom. Norman Wirzba makes this case when he reminds us of the link between "culture" itself and the cultivation of land, or gardening:

In its earlier Middle English usage the word "culture" referred to a piece of land. More specifically, it referred to a *cultivated* piece of land (the Latin *cultura* means "cultivation of the soil") suggesting that the sign of a cultured person was to understand and know how to work with gardening realities like

soil and plant and animal life. Gardening work is fundamental because in it we discover how to feed ourselves and others. In it we learn how to care for each other and the earth upon which we necessarily depend.¹⁹

He goes on to claim that this understanding has largely been lost, along with the practical skills and knowledge of gardening, which is too often now seen as a leisure activity or a hobby rather than something fundamental to our lives as cultured human beings. Church gardening can help redress that imbalance and bring those much-needed skills and insights to people who might never choose to take up gardening otherwise.

3. Another criterion offered by Dykstra and Bass is that a Christian practice “is important in Scripture and in the ministry of Jesus.”²⁰ Even a casual reader of the Bible can recognize quickly that gardening is a primary metaphor in Scripture and that food and eating are of the utmost importance to Jesus. Ellen F. Davis convincingly argues that the Old Testament must be read through an agrarian lens to be understood properly, because it was written with an agrarian mindset. She writes:

Beginning with the first chapter of Genesis, there is no extensive exploration of the relationship between God and humanity that does not factor the land and its fertility into that relationship. Overall from a biblical perspective, the sustained fertility and habitability of the earth, or more particularly of the land of Israel, is the best index of the health of the covenant relationship.²¹

Gardening, then, is much more than metaphor; the proper cultivation of the land is of utmost importance in the Old Testament and so church gardening is a practice

¹⁹ Wirzba, *Food and Faith*, 37.

²⁰ Dykstra and Bass, “A Way of Thinking,” 205.

²¹ Davis, *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture*, 8.

with deep roots in Scripture. Other scholars are taking on the task of asking similar questions of the New Testament; Barbara Rossing's ecological reading of the Book of Revelation is a notable example. She has written also about issues of food and justice in the Gospel of Luke, with the clear intention that these readings of New Testament texts should challenge Christians to consider such issues in our own world today: "Food hoarding and unsustainable agricultural practices imperil our very soul."²² In light of this kind of scholarship, church gardens that model sustainability and help shape our relationship to food are a thoroughly scriptural and Jesus-centered practice.

4. Dykstra and Bass also assert that every Christian practice "can become distorted and corrupted, and so is open to criticism and reform."²³ The connection to church gardening is not immediately apparent, but can be discerned when one begins to think of some of the things that could go wrong with a church gardening initiative. The team who manages the Shepherd Farm garden has worked hard to stay open to criticism from within the congregation, which thus far has primarily involved concern over accessibility for our older, less able members. While we did have one or two octogenarians work in the garden, the point about accessibility was still well taken. In fact we did need to make changes between the first and second year to make the garden more accessible, as will be discussed in the chapter on

²² Barbara Rossing, "Why Luke's Gospel? Daily Bread and 'Recognition' of Christ in Food-Sharing" *Currents in Theology and Mission* 37:3 (June 2010) 228. Her ecological reading of Revelation is developed in *The Rapture Exposed: The Message of Hope in the Book of Revelation* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2004).

²³ Dykstra and Bass, "A Way of Thinking," 205.

community. Other changes will doubtless become necessary as the garden and the community evolve, or corruption and resentment will almost certainly set in.

Church gardens can become sources of conflict and tension over how resources are used. For us these have gone in two basic directions: what resources are used by the garden, and what we do with the resources the garden produces. Worries about money are pervasive. We are a parish that survives on deficit budgets and so has to watch every penny. Our solution to keeping the congregation's anxiety about money from undermining their support of the garden has been to keep the garden entirely separate from the parish's operating budget. Shepherd Farm runs on grants and donations only, so we do not have an impact on the parish budget; it turns out this is a message that needs to be repeated every time budget concerns are raised. Of course it is a double-edged sword: we have also had people question why we do not use produce from the garden to raise money for the parish, but we simply cannot do that given the constraints of the grants that fund us. Similar tensions sometimes arise over land management issues, such as whether or not we should use pesticides or employ a no-till style of gardening. In our case these conflicts have not gone so far as to become corrupting, but one can certainly see how the potential is there.

So those are some practical issues that might lead to corruption and the need for reform; undoubtedly there are many other ways for church gardening as a practice to become distorted and corrupted, some of a more spiritual nature. Competition could be a corrupting spirit in a church garden. Parishes that have gardens might become competitive with one another, not in a friendly and healthy

way, but in a selfish or territorial way. Church gardens, like other forms of community gardens, can only benefit from cooperation and collaboration, but it can be hard for members and leaders alike to remember that they are not primarily a special program to set the congregation apart. Rather, church gardens are a life-giving Christian practice that should be encouraged in all communities. If a congregation thinks of its garden as part of a zero-sum game and falls into the trap of seeing its garden as something that makes it special and sets it apart from other congregations, then the spirit of abundance and hospitality that is meant to be fostered by gardening has become distorted and corrupted through selfishness and a scarcity mentality. A similar trap can be set by people putting too much emphasis on productivity. In a successful season of gardening, this can become a source of unhealthy pride. In an unsuccessful season, the same emphasis becomes disheartening. Either way, focusing too much on the quantity produced and not enough on the quality of the process of gardening can be damaging spiritually and emotionally. These are some possible ways that church gardening can become a practice in need of reform, just as every other practice (because practiced by fallible human beings) can be corrupted.

5. A Christian practice “comes to a focus in worship.”²⁴ At Good Shepherd we found this to be true in two primary ways: through our first experience of a Rogation Day celebration and through the influence of the garden on my preaching and teaching. Rogation Days were once commonly practiced in our churches but they began to fall out of favor during the Reformation; their doom was nearly sealed by our society’s

²⁴ Dykstra and Bass, “A Way of Thinking,” 205.

disconnection from its agricultural foundations, but they seem to be making a minor comeback. When Rogation Days were common they went something like this: for three days before the Feast of the Ascension everyone living within the geographical boundaries of the parish would gather together for a series of processions, which included banners, crosses, bells, and litanies. Participants also beat the edges of the fields with sticks, both to mark out the physical limits of the parish and also to beat away any demons or evil spirits that might have been lurking in the hedgerows. Largely forgotten today, these rituals were once as vital to the formation of a shared parish identity as anything that occurred during the liturgical year, either inside or outside the church building.²⁵ Once the church garden had become a focal point in the life of the parish, a Rogation Procession became an obvious way to integrate the practice of gardening with our worship. This will be discussed more in Chapter Four, as will other means of bringing the garden to focus in worship.

Additionally, time in the garden influenced my preaching, both in the choice of texts and in the exegesis of them. For the connection between the garden and people's spiritual lives to take root and become intentional, rather than latent, there must be someone helping to articulate the contours and development of that connection. In most congregations regular opportunities for communication and conversation, while vital, tend to reach only particular, self-selected segments of the congregation. On the other hand, the Sunday Eucharist and, in particular, the sermon are where the majority of people will be shaped and formed. They become a shared experience and provide fodder

²⁵ My primary source for information on Rogationtide is Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England 1400-1580* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 136-9.

for conversation among parishioners, helping to shape the local culture and priorities. So, if the desired spiritual benefits are to be transformative for the whole congregation, and not just for individuals (especially in congregations where actual gardeners are in the minority), preaching must take priority. This too will be discussed again in Chapter Four.

My emphasis on preaching is almost certainly due to my own sense of vocation and the seriousness with which I take my commitment to “nourish Christ’s people from the riches of his grace” (BCP 531); I pour myself into my sermons because I feel that is my best opportunity to nourish Christ’s people, and that Scripture is one of the true riches we share and which we all too often neglect. I hope this focus is not the result of unexamined clericalism but something rather more like its opposite: preaching and presiding are the two primary things my congregation asks and expects me to do with frequency, passion, and authority that are genuinely bound up in the priestly vocation. Within the liturgy and beyond it, there are many leadership roles that I share with others or even cede to them, but I am one of only two people in my congregation who is authorized to preach (we have a non-stipendiary deacon) and the only one paid for it. Many other ministry functions can be done as well or better by the laity, who are called to ministry in unique and irreplaceable ways through their baptisms. From both the preaching and the liturgical perspective, church gardening can and should come to focus in worship, as befits a Christian practice.

6. Dykstra and Bass list several other attributes of Christian practices, but it will suffice to conclude with one more: a Christian practice “is a gift to which we respond in gratitude, not a task we do only out of duty.”²⁶ There is an almost

²⁶ Dykstra and Bass, “A Way of Thinking,” 205.

ineffable pleasure in gardening that many writers and scholars strive to express.

Vigen Guroian articulates one aspect of that pleasure, which has to do with

aesthetics:

The fruit of the garden is not restricted to what we eat. Every garden lends something more to the imagination—beauty. The beauty of a turnip garden may be more homely than the beauty of a tulip garden, but there is beauty in it nevertheless. Every garden holds the potential of giving us a taste of paradise.²⁷

The beauty of a vegetable garden encompasses all five senses, making it a rare aesthetic pleasure indeed, and one that perhaps can be compared to participation in liturgical worship, in that it is a whole body experience with great spiritual import. At the height of its fruitfulness our church garden delights the eye with its countless shades of green and exclamation points of red, yellow, orange, and even purple. It provides tangible pleasure when you brush against soft leaves while walking between raised beds. It delights the ear (and the soul) primarily as a place of quiet, but not of total silence: in the hush of the garden you can hear droning bees and birdsong. Most especially it provides pleasure in the forms of taste and smell: the lingering aroma of a ripe tomato combined with the pungency of our herb plants; abundant edibles like sugar snap peas and the flowering stalks of *bok choy* that can be broken off and eaten without preparation while the sun warms your skin and the earth still steams from a recent rain. Learning to appreciate the church garden's sensuous pleasures did not negate the hard work that went into it. As Guroian says, "the fruit of sweet communion comes after the gall and the vinegar. The mystical

²⁷ Vigen Guroian, "The Christian gardener: An Orthodox meditation," in *The Christian Century* (February 28, 1996) 230.

enjoyment comes not without the toilsome askesis of raking and sowing and pulling up the weeds.”²⁸

Gratitude can take many forms, and after a day of working in the garden it can be as simple as honest gratitude for a break in the hard work. But mostly the garden produces gratitude for the abundance of God’s creation, for the beauty of the earth, for the opportunity to work, learn, and laugh with fellow gardeners, and for the amazing opportunity to provide fresh, nutritious food for hungry people.

Working in the garden is both real work—hard, physical labor—and a gift of inestimable worth. The surplus of gratitude it produces are another marker identifying church gardening as a Christian practice; additionally, the incarnational nature of it and the sensory feast it provides make it a practice closely related to Eucharist, a form of worship itself identified as “a sacrifice of thanks and praise.”

D. Conclusion: Practice and Experience

Even before we began our church garden project, Good Shepherd had some experience with exploring Christian practices. In 2012 during Lent we held a Sunday morning adult formation series focusing on “spiritual” practices (as we called them at that time). We knew enough about spiritual practices to know that these sessions should be, within the constraints of time and space given to us, experiential rather than abstract. So, for instance, on the day that we learned about labyrinths, we borrowed a full-size canvas labyrinth from our Cathedral and had people walk it, rather than just do a slideshow or lecture about labyrinths. Other practices included in the series were drawing our prayers, using and listening to Tibetan prayer bowls, experimenting with yoga, and making

²⁸ Guroian, “The Christian gardener,” 228.

Anglican rosaries. When the series was over, however, so was all discussion of spiritual practices in the congregation. We did find ways to incorporate the Tibetan prayer bowls into our liturgy from time to time, and we have also used labyrinths and yoga in other programs (such as Vacation Bible School). But a more sustained conversation about the role of practices, or a more sustained engagement with any of those practices, did not result from our Lenten series. At the time I could not have foreseen that Christian practices would come to play an important role in our congregation, or that the impetus for a new understanding of these practices would result from the development and growth of a church garden. There was simply no way at that point to anticipate that less than two years later our congregation would begin a conversion process, one that started with digging in the dirt.

For Good Shepherd, reading and learning about Christian practices, even experimenting briefly with a series of practices, did not lead to a noticeable change in congregational priorities, interests, or energy. Christian practices, by their nature, require sustained time and attention to have a significant impact on an individual or community. They need to be engaged repeatedly and experienced in a committed community if they are to offer the possibility of transformation. Sarah Coakley, writing about the practices commended in the Rule of St. Benedict, notes that the “unsystematic nature” of these practices “provokes reflection on the almost subliminal and unconscious way in which spiritual re-modulation and transformation may occur over a lifetime through repeated practices.” She continues,

This alerts us to the importance of disciplined repetition in the fruitful interaction of belief and practice. Moreover, bodily acts of worship and

attention (even if the mind is distracted) have their own integrity and effect; as the anthropologist Talal Asad has remarked, unbelief can be more truly the result of “untaught bodies” than of uninstructed minds.²⁹

It turned out that for us time, attention, and discipline really did matter in the terms of the impact the practice of gardening had on us. There was a significant difference between reading about and briefly experimenting with a practice, such as we did with walking the labyrinth, and with experiencing a practice as a significant commitment of time and focus, as we did with church gardening. The difference that church gardening has made so far in the life of our congregation will be theme of the next three chapters, which will explore the interrelated practices of discernment, hospitality, and community shaping.

²⁹ Sarah Coakley, “Deepening Practices: Perspectives from Ascetical and Mystical Theology,” in *Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life*, ed. Miroslav Volf and Dorothy C. Bass (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2002), 87.

Chapter Two

Discernment and Moving Forward in Faith

Mary Oliver’s famous challenge, “Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?”³⁰ can apply to communities as well as individuals. After all, we spend time together in church, we accumulate and use resources, and through our choices we have an impact on other people and the world we inhabit. Making those choices wisely requires some form of discernment, which will be the focus of this chapter. I begin with a discussion of discernment in the Book of Acts, followed by a brief look at discernment as a Christian practice. I then consider how Good Shepherd practiced discernment in making the decision to start the Shepherd Farm garden. In order to make a sensible argument about the garden as a spiritual practice, some context about the congregation in which it is situated will have to be considered. The middle two sections of this chapter, therefore, will offer key information about the physical location and history of Good Shepherd. I will conclude with some preliminary conclusions about the way that the discernment process and the garden itself have affected our community’s faith life.

A. Understanding Discernment

1. Some Biblical context on discernment

Frank Rogers, Jr. defines discernment as “the intentional practice by which a community or an individual seeks, recognizes, and intentionally takes part in the activity

³⁰ <https://www.loc.gov/poetry/180/133.html>

of God in concrete situations.”³¹ The Bible is full of stories of discernment, offering a model for the church today. Perhaps the most powerful New Testament examples of discernment can be found in the Book of Acts. Discernment was necessary to the first Christian communities because they had no blueprint or instructions for how followers of Jesus should live after Jesus was no longer living among them on an earthly plane. The first and only interaction between Jesus and the apostles in this book suggests how integral the process of discernment was to this nascent community. The author of Acts tells us that “when they had come together, they asked him, ‘Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?’” Knowing what time it is, whether it is the right time, the appointed hour, remains a key component of discernment. Often the question that individuals and communities want to ask God is not so much, “What do you want us to do?”, but rather, “Is the time for action now, or is this a time for waiting, learning, and listening?” The apostles were no different in this regard. In order to achieve clarity about how to move forward they needed to know if their timing was right.

Clarity, however, is not always a guaranteed outcome of discernment. Jesus answered the apostles’ question by not answering it, telling them that they had no need of that information, or perhaps no right to it: “He replied, ‘It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority.’” He went on to offer them instead a new promise, the promise that they “will receive power” through the arrival of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:7-8). This exchange illustrates an important pattern of discernment. The apostles thought they required a particular answer from Jesus in order to align their lives and plans with God’s purposes for them; Jesus, in his more perfect understanding, both

³¹ Frank Rogers Jr., “Discernment,” in *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People*, 2nd ed., ed. Dorothy C. Bass (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass), 105.

denied the specific request and also assured them that what God had in store for them was greater than anything that they could have asked for or imagined (Ephesians 3:20).

Rogers elucidates this reality for those engaging in discernment today, noting that

discernment rarely yields absolute certainty, and action itself is part of the discernment process. Sometimes our action reveals that a direction is misguided, in which case we should repeat the discernment process. At other times, the direction is confirmed.³²

Of course the apostles did not have to worry at that moment about using action to help them decide if a particular direction was misguided. They had received guidance directly from Jesus: wait for the arrival of the Holy Spirit. Most of us in the throes of discernment will have to take a more trial-and-error approach.

Rogers's insights normalize this part of the process and gently suggest that too much certainty can be more damaging than a degree of ambiguity and doubt.

The experience of partial denial and redirection outlined above in the interaction between the apostles and Jesus just before his ascension is only one of several patterns that discernment can follow. An incident that results in a more direct answer to the question posed of God is found in the story of how the apostles chose Matthias as a replacement for Judas (Acts 1:15-26). Peter took the leadership role here, outlining the reasons for this action and the necessary requirements for choosing a candidate. Then the community stepped up, in answer to Peter's challenge, and proposed two suitable men. So far the process was rational and objective, recognizing a real need and assuring as far as possible that the need would be met in a way that pleased God.

³² Rogers, "Discernment," 108.

The final step of discernment was, famously, for the apostles to cast lots. What made this an act of intentional discernment, and not simply leaving it up to chance, was that the apostles prayed and asked God to use the casting of lots to reveal his will: “Then they prayed and said, ‘Lord, you know everyone’s heart. Show us which one of these two you have chosen to take the place in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside to go to his own place’” (Acts 1:24-25). There is a lot to notice in these two short verses. First, there is the assumption that God is all-knowing and has in fact already chosen one of the two men under consideration. Real discernment is about asking for *God’s* will to be revealed, not about asking for God to make things work out the way we want or to affirm choices that we have already made. This insight relates to another key point—the opposite of discernment is something akin to willfulness or selfishness. Judas is the primary exemplar here. It might seem that describing his betrayal of Jesus, an act that led to the death of their teacher, friend, and Savior, as merely “turning aside to go to his own place” is a grotesque, almost satirical, understatement. But in fact when discernment is central to a community’s way of life, there is nothing more destructive than “turning aside” and going one’s own way. Such self-centeredness is the ultimate betrayal, a rejection of the covenanted relationship with one’s community and with God that is supposed to guide all decisions.

One more example from the Book of Acts will help round out our understanding of Biblical discernment as it relates to Christian practices. In Acts 10, Cornelius and Peter each separately experience visions that ultimately help the Jerusalem church change its mind about how to incorporate Gentiles into its growing community of faith. Neither individual asks for these visions, but both are willing to believe they are from God and to

share them with others. More than that, neither man's vision is complete or can be interpreted without access to the other's vision. So in this case two community leaders start the discernment process by establishing a relationship of trust, putting together their separate experiences of God like two pieces of a puzzle, and using the affirmation this provides to further lead and guide their own communities. Through these men a whole community of Gentiles was converted: without Cornelius's invitation to Peter (10:22), Peter's willingness to testify (10:34), and the people's willingness to listen (10:33), the Holy Spirit might not have fallen upon all those who were gathered to hear the word. Furthermore, that incident then led Peter to persuade the church in Jerusalem (11:2) that even Gentiles would now be saved by believing in the Lord Jesus Christ (11:17). This pattern may seem more familiar to today's church: someone receives an intuition, an idea, or possibly a vision, but it requires interaction with others and even some testing out before it is clear exactly what that intuition, idea, or vision really means and how it should be utilized by the community.

2. Discernment as Christian Practice

As we can see from these examples from the Book of Acts (and from many other stories in the Bible not considered here), the process of discernment involves community, God, and individual leaders. Listening and cooperation are key elements of the practice, although this does not exclude the possibility that individual leaders will receive an answer from God that they must then share with their community and perhaps persuade them to accept. Sometimes the answer is more direct and thus more certain, other times it is a partial or incomplete answer, or even an answer that points the seeker in a new direction by not explicitly answering the question posed. Guidance from God can come in

the form of God's word, in dreams and visions, or through ordinary conversations with other human beings.

Frank Rogers Jr.'s chapter in *Practicing Our Faith* speaks clearly to the matter of what various Christian traditions have to teach about the process and promise of discernment as a practice: discernment offers "an opportunity to imagine solutions we did not anticipate in the beginning" and therefore "it helps us to find better paths toward the future."³³ Communities and congregations today have to make so many choices about how to conduct their common life; the process of choosing can be stressful and paralyzing unless there is a sense that the community is being guided by a common purpose. In the context of closing congregations and dwindling attendance that face the Church today, many choices that present themselves seem superficial or cosmetic, like the proverbial arranging of deck chairs on the Titanic. Do we use organ music or a praise band? Prayer books or worship bulletins? Support Heifer International or Episcopal Relief and Development? And of course there is the question that many leaders, lay and ordained, find themselves asking repeatedly: Will any of this matter in five years time if we don't get the books in the black? Discernment as a spiritual practice can help create an actual sense of direction and vocation that will guide communities, putting these constant, nagging, everyday decisions into a larger perspective while opening up genuinely new possibilities and authentic ways forward in an uncertain world.

It should be clear by now that discernment is indeed a Christian practice, in the sense outlined by Dykstra and Bass and discussed in Chapter One of this thesis. In church circles the term "discernment process" often refers to something formal and structured,

³³ Rogers, "Discernment," 111.

such as the process used by most dioceses to determine whether or not an individual is called to ordained ministry; however, informal processes of discernment are going on all the time in congregations, in households, and in individual lives. Dykstra and Bass list discernment as one of the twelve primary Christian practices, which makes sense when one recalls the definition of a Christian practice as a communal, repeated, long-term complex of actions employed by members of a faith community that move the individuals and the community so employed into deeper levels of spiritual growth and engagement (see Chapter 1, page 9). At the same time, it is related to all other practices because discernment is necessary whenever a community starts a new practice or even evaluates the utility and health of an ongoing practice.

What follows is a brief review of four of the main attributes of Christian practices³⁴ and how those attributes pertain specifically to discernment. To begin with, discernment is “important in Scripture and in the ministry of Jesus”: this chapter has only looked at patterns of discernment in the Book of Acts, but occasions of discernment can be found throughout the Old and New Testaments, and particularly in Gospel stories where an encounter with Jesus changes a person’s direction in life. Discernment “embodies what we believe and strengthens our beliefs by grounding them in daily life experience”: discernment is a practice that values a multiplicity of voices, perspectives, and experiences, and also embodies our Baptismal Covenant vow to “seek and serve Christ in all persons.” Finally, discernment is practiced communally and, in the words of Dykstra and Bass, “must be learned from others and belongs to the community as a whole.” As we shall see in relation to Good Shepherd’s process, it takes the questions and

³⁴ Dykstra and Bass, “A Way of Thinking,” 204.

concerns of a congregation, as well as their insights, gifts, and enthusiasms, to create a healthy and productive discernment process.

B. Context for Discernment Process at Good Shepherd

I will now consider how Good Shepherd's process of deciding to start our Shepherd Farm garden was an example of discernment as a Christian practice. Our practice of discernment was perhaps not as intentional as what Rogers encourages in his work, but it did involve listening, leadership, and some conflict and uncertainty about whether or not "the" answer had been revealed to us, as well as a willingness to try something new and face possible failure in our sincere efforts to "join in the activity of God in concrete situations." For many in the congregation, the results has been a deepened sense of trust and a feeling of assurance that we are following God's will rather than frantically seeking another program to save us from obscurity or collapse.

1. Context of Good Shepherd: Our location and what it means

Good Shepherd is a small parish, with an average Sunday attendance hovering around 60-65 people for the past several years. It is located in Town and Country, a wealthy suburb west of St. Louis, Missouri, and was established as a mission of a larger parish in 1953. The church seats 125 people. In addition, there is a rectory, a wing with classrooms and offices, and a sizeable parish hall. This small cluster of buildings and a parking lot sit on nearly six acres of land.

A very small set of buildings on a large plot of land set far back from a side road in a bucolic suburb might not sound like the most challenging context for parish ministry. In fact, though, this set of circumstances poses several serious challenges. First there is the "set far back" issue: the church is nearly invisible to the surrounding neighborhood.

Numerous times we hear comments such as, “I drive down that road all the time and I never realized there was a church there.” (Although we have a tasteful sign near the road.) Our buildings are small, unexceptional, and from the outside could be easily mistaken for a public elementary school. There is neither grandeur nor quaintness in evidence. In addition to the problems of visibility and unclear first impressions, there is the problem of the neighborhood itself. Town and Country residents mostly live on large pieces of property, often of an acre or more, and many of them in gated communities. There are limited sidewalks and very little walking traffic near Good Shepherd, making it a location that few people will stumble on by accident. Most of our parishioners do not live in Town and Country but rather travel to it from other, generally less affluent, suburbs. This gives the parish something of a sense of isolation, as if it is not part of the place where it is located, and makes it difficult to establish meaningful connections to the community.

Finally there was the state of the land itself. It was, for the most part, lawn. There were some trees, and some shrubbery, but mostly it was a large unadorned lawn, especially in the areas visible from the road. Some ornamental garden patches had been created and maintained by parishioners, but again they were primarily in areas that were not visible to the general public. The size of the lawn was consistent with those maintained by most residential properties in the area and had perhaps been created with the intention of aligning the appearance of the church property with the rest of the neighborhood. Whatever its intended purpose, the lawn was not put to good use. We did not use it for soccer games, picnics, or anything that might have justified a large open flat expanse of grass. Furthermore, the lawn was expensive to maintain and environmentally

irresponsible. We hired a company that used a large ride-on mower to cut the grass, which consumed irreplaceable fossil fuels and created both noise and air pollution. Because of the environmental costs of large expanses of lawn, including “significant amounts of runoff that can contain pesticides and fertilizers,” the Missouri Botanical Garden recommends replacing lawn “with trees, shrubs, perennials and/or prairie gardens.”³⁵ In an effort to be transparent about my biases, I should probably admit that I did not much like the lawn even before I knew about these recommendations. My irritation came first; an effort to justify it followed.

Michael Pollan, renowned for his food writing, has made a number of compelling observations about lawns as metaphor and status symbol that have helped clarify some of my concerns about the situation at Good Shepherd. He explores the deeper meaning in how people choose to conform (or not) to the suburban ideal of an uninterrupted expanse of green lawn and all the implied embrace of egalitarianism and democracy that go along with it. There can be an unpleasant coerciveness to this kind of unacknowledged cultural conformity; Pollan quotes a 19th century landscape designer who despised fences and hedgerows on suburban front yards, declaring in all seriousness that, “It is unchristian [...] to hedge from the sight of others the beauties of nature which it has been our good fortune to create or secure.”³⁶ Pollan goes on to argue persuasively that this “deep-seated distrust of individualistic approaches to the landscape” is still alive and quite widespread in American culture today. He continues:

³⁵ <http://www.missouribotanicalgarden.org/sustainability-conservation/sustainable-living/at-home/rainscaping-guide/lawn-alternatives.aspx>

³⁶ Michael Pollan, *Second Nature: A Gardener's Education* (NY: Grove Press, 1991), 59.

Of course the democratic front yard has its darker, more coercive side. [...] In commending the plain style of an unembellished lawn for American front yards, the mid-century designer-reformers were, like Puritan ministers, laying down rigid conventions governing our relationship to the land, our observance of which would henceforth be taken as an index to our character. And just as the Puritans would not tolerate any individual who sought to establish his or her own back channel relationship with the divinity, the members of the suburban utopia do not tolerate the homeowners who establish a relationship with the land that is not mediated by the group's conventions. The parallel is not as farfetched as it might sound when you recall that nature in America has often been regarded as divine. Think of nature as Spirit, the collective suburban lawn as the church, and lawn mowing as a kind of sacrament.³⁷

Churches have always sat uneasily in the liminal space between conformity to the culture and allegiance to a different vision of the world, whether expressed as the Kingdom of Heaven, the New Jerusalem, or the City of God. The property at Good Shepherd was designed during a time when the pendulum swing was all in the direction of conformity, within both the church and the larger culture. The landscaping was perfectly appropriate for the 1950s church, when the institution was assumed to be a secure part of the fabric of American society. Nearly six decades later, the cultural and religious landscape had changed dramatically, but the church's physical property appeared to be stuck in a time warp.

Finally, the landscaping was, in a word, unwelcoming. A first-time visitor would have to brave a long and rather barren driveway to find the parking lot and the entrance doors, with little encouragement along the way to suggest that we really meant what our roadside sign proclaimed: "The Episcopal Church welcomes you." Instead, the grounds created a visual and actual distance between ourselves and our neighbors without providing any commensurate benefit to either the church members or the larger community. The effects produced by our landscaping did not offer our neighbors

³⁷ Pollan, *Second Nature*, 60.

evidence of an alternative community dedicated to living in harmony with the world as God made it and fulfilling our sacred duty to tend to the earth and help make it fruitful and beautiful, or even as church dedicated to sharing “a place of worship and fellowship where our hearts meet God’s light,” as our mission statement purports.

In sum, what we had at Good Shepherd was a big piece of land that was, in the most literal sense, unproductive. By creating a physical environment that blended in with our suburban surroundings, we had undermined those qualities that should have made us distinctly a church. To the passerby, there was nothing to see that spoke of our theological commitments, no embodiment of the doctrine of Creation. Our grounds did not celebrate nature, as might have been achieved by the use of prairie grass or other indigenous plants for landscaping, and nor did they celebrate anything distinctive about Christian culture or beliefs by being beautiful or useful. In the Book of Common Prayer we pray, “O heavenly Father, who has filled the world with beauty: Open our eyes to behold your gracious hand in all your work; that, rejoicing in your whole creation, we may learn to serve you with gladness.”³⁸ Church architecture and landscaping should serve as aesthetic and sensory aids to help open people’s eyes, to make it easier to see beauty and from beauty to see God’s love and creativity at work. The layout of our grounds, with its unmitigated expanse of lawn, made us appear neutral, in the sense of being essentially the same as any other building in the neighborhood, from a post office to a house to a school. It certainly in no way hinted that what we were offering inside our doors was transformation, true fellowship, and the way of life abundant.

³⁸ “For Joy in God’s Creation,” in *The Book of Common Prayer* (New York: Church Publishing, 1979), 814.

2. Context of Good Shepherd: Our history and its repercussions

Although I was unaware of this connection at the beginning of the garden project, in retrospect I believe that our parish history and some old wounds we were still nursing had an impact on our ability to make bold decisions about how to use our land. Good Shepherd holds a unique place in the Diocese of Missouri, as the only parish that almost became a “breakaway” during the tumultuous years following the General Convention of 2003. It is not necessary to go into great detail about our parish history, but I do think a bit more explanation of our recent past is pertinent to the story of our garden.

Good Shepherd had fairly predictable patterns of growth for its first 50 years or so. Although the optimism of its founders in the 1950s was never fully realized, as evidenced by the small “chapel” not being replaced by a larger “church” because the congregation never outgrew the smaller building, it was nevertheless considered a healthy little suburban church. Through conversations with longtime parishioners and clergy who have been in the Diocese much longer than I, I have learned of a general, but not universal, pattern of clergy misconduct. Issues that have been raised regarding previous rectors include alcohol abuse, financial mismanagement, and sexual misconduct, the last of which resulted in a priest’s removal.

In February, 2004, after a period of growth under the leadership of a charismatic but controversial rector, a simmering conflict came to a head and culminated in an 84-14 vote to break away from the Episcopal Church. The rector wanted to join the Anglican Mission in America but keep the church property for the congregation. Those who had

voted to remain in the Episcopal Church were ousted and forced to worship elsewhere.³⁹ A legal fight for the property ensued, and parishioners today often speak of that as a period when they “lost the church” or were “locked out of the church.” Ultimately, the Diocese won the legal battle, and the buildings and all property were kept intact as part of the Episcopal Church of the Good Shepherd. Most of the people, however, were gone. They either went with the previous rector, who started his own congregation nearby, or they joined another Episcopal parish, or they simply melted away without explanation. When the doors of the church reopened, approximately 12 people were left who considered themselves members of the parish. That faithful remnant worked tirelessly with the next rector (the Rev. John Musgrave, my predecessor) to rebuild the congregation to its current size.

Unfortunately, there is a sad coda even to this new chapter in our parish history, and it is also the proximate cause of my call to Good Shepherd. Three years into his tenure as rector, with the redevelopment of the parish in full swing, my predecessor was diagnosed with a debilitating and deadly disease while still in the prime of his life. His illness and death came as a huge blow to the people of Good Shepherd. At the urging of the Vestry and with the approval of the Bishop, John and his family remained as members of the parish after his retirement, until his death in 2013.

There are two primary connections that should be made between this history and the development of the garden, issues that came into play during the discernment process. I want to be clear that these are my observations, not explicit conclusions articulated by

³⁹ An article about this situation that first ran in the St. Louis Post-Dispatch is still available for view at <http://virtueonline.org/st-louis-after-agonizing-split-church-faction-returns-its-home>

members of the parish. Still, they are observations informed by four years as rector of this parish and multiple conversations with people inside and outside the parish who know our history. First, there are obviously issues around loss and ownership raised by such a history. It is a loss, in the emotional sense, whenever a rector leaves, and a more complicated loss when the leaving is precipitated by conflict, illness, or misconduct. When the property, the land itself as well as the buildings, was also nearly lost, that added even more emotional distress into the mix. That acute distress could have made the congregation especially risk-averse in relation to the use of the land and resources.

Second, I believe there is a lingering suspicion of growth and “big ideas” that resulted from that tumultuous time. Deeply encoded in what might be called the genetic makeup of the congregation is the belief that growth will be met with disaster, and perhaps even that they are punished when they try too hard to grow. At least three times in succession, a rector with energy and passion led them into a period of growth and/or renewal, and then abruptly exited in a dramatic and traumatic fashion (once through the revelation of multiple affairs, once by breaking away from the Episcopal Church, and finally through untimely disease and death). There is a pattern here, and it has subtly but insidiously taught the congregation that rectors with big ideas and the courage to grow cannot be trusted to stick around and take care of them.

One short anecdote might illustrate how these patterns have tended to manifest in everyday parish; like all anecdotes, this is suggestive more than conclusive, but it was not an entirely isolated incident. During my first month at Good Shepherd, I heard the doorbell ring and went to answer it. Standing outside was a longtime parishioner, who all but pointed a finger at me and sputtered, “You changed the lock! You changed the lock

and didn't even tell me!" In fact I had not changed the lock; it had malfunctioned due to freezing weather and I was waiting for it to be repaired. The parishioner and I were able to laugh about it, but for me it was a wakeup call. Many members of the parish were primed and ready to be disappointed or betrayed by me, to the point of assuming that I, too, would lock them out of the parish. If it had happened before, it could happen again.

With this history and these patterns in mind, it is all the more remarkable that the congregation was able to support a church garden at all. A garden requires a few attributes that might quite understandably be in short supply in a parish with such a history, attributes including faith in the future and trust in the leadership's discernment and decision-making. Gardens are nothing if not acts of faith. This is one of the clearest indications that church gardening belongs in the category of Christian practices: practices, like gardens, hold no guarantee of success. As we have already seen in the context of discernment as a Christian practice, it is the doing, more than the outcome, that makes the difference in our lives. Dykstra and Bass insist that practices are "always done imperfectly."⁴⁰ Gardens, too, have their inevitable imperfections and failures, no matter how much research and planning and hard work go into them. Craig Dykstra also writes that Christian practices,

are not activities we do to make something spiritual happen in our lives. Nor are they duties we undertake to be obedient to God. Rather, they are patterns of communal action that create openings in our lives where the grace, mercy, and presence of God may be made known to us and, through us, to others.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Dykstra and Bass, "A Theological Understanding of Christian Practices," in *Practicing Theology*, 21.

⁴¹ Dykstra, *Growing in the Life of Faith: Education and Christian Practices* 2nd ed., (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), quoted in Dykstra and Bass, "A Way of Thinking," 206.

Even in the planning stages of the garden, there was a desire to “create openings in our lives.” We wanted to create openings that would allow us to connect more securely and deeply to our larger community as well as to hungry people nearby. We knew this would require communal action. We did not really have any idea of how much grace, mercy, and the presence of God could be made known to us in the process.

C: Discernment at Good Shepherd: How to move forward in faith

The process of discernment started soon after I began my time at Good Shepherd, as a natural outgrowth of deciding on parish priorities under a new rector. While I was eager to help the congregation find a way forward during a difficult time of grief and uncertainty, I felt it was important to do so slowly lest I appear too critical or too anxious to change things. Most of my first two years there I was happy to let the congregation take the lead, holding brainstorming sessions and beginning some new ministries and programs. There were a number of factors that had to converge before the question of what to with our land would become a top priority. These will be explained in more detail in the sections that follow, but in brief they were (1) a combination of my own discontent with the way the property was being under-utilized, along with (2) the congregation’s desire to find an outreach program or project that would help define their identity and guide their future.

I will begin with my discontent. As outlined in subsection 1 above, the property at Good Shepherd clearly had a lot of potential and was a major resource in our possession, but it also left a lot to be desired. The Biblical text that most influenced my understanding of the situation was the Parable of the Talents (Matthew 25:14-30). In these verses, Jesus tells the story of a master who gives three different servants different amounts of his

property to watch over (five talents to the first, two talents to the second, and one talent to the third), goes off on a journey, and then demands an accounting from the servants upon his return. The first two servants invested the property and doubled what they had been given; they were rewarded for their trustworthiness. The third servant could return only the one talent he had been given, as he had been so afraid to make a mistake that he buried the talent in the ground, thus insuring that it could not be lost but neither could it grow. He was vilified by his master and thrown into outer darkness. There is a long tradition of interpreting this parable in terms of stewardship, and it seems applicable to the church's situation as much as it is to individuals.

It seemed to me that if our parish as a community were suddenly to face Judgment Day, based entirely on how we were utilizing the land and buildings given to us, we would not be greeted with, "Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master." We were acting more like the third servant, the fearful one, than either of the first two risk-takers. To own so much property and be doing nothing with it was quite simply bad stewardship, a refusal to recognize the bounty that God had given us and make good use of it. There were reasons for that fear and refusal, as our history illustrates, but the Biblical account suggested strongly that we were being called to move beyond the limitations of that history and into a new way of life.

Shepherd Farm, as it turns out, is not the first garden to spring from the soil of holy discontent. Norman Wirzba tells the story of the Anathoth Community Garden, an endeavor that grew out of an experience of violence that nearly shattered the small community of Cedar Grove, North Carolina. As people sought ways to reconcile after a

beloved community member was murdered, one fifth-generation resident “received a vision from God that she should give five acres of land to help feed the hungry.” As an African-American descendant of sharecroppers, Scenobia Taylor was both the victim of years of racism and also a leader in the movement toward reconciliation. And using her land generously and productively was the strongest statement she could make and the most meaningful gift could give. Wirzba records her as saying, “And then here we have all this land here. And then what we do with it? We not doin’ nothin’. I wanted to do something like you know my grandfather and father did, you know. And I just pray, and I were praying and I said Lord, please show me, give me a sign or somethin’.”⁴² Unlike Scenobia Taylor, I did not receive a vision from God about what to do with Good Shepherd’s property, but like her I did pray for guidance. Of course her land was hers to give away, whereas “my” land belonged to my community, my congregation, and any decisions about its use had to be made with the full knowledge and consensus of the community.

Standing alongside my growing concern about the land was a process of brainstorming about new ministry and mission opportunities in which to engage. At that time the congregation offered financial and material support to several organizations, locally and nationally, such as by collecting canned goods for a food pantry and raising money for an animal shelter. Although appreciative of these good works, many in the parish had been searching for an enterprise that was centered on and driven by Good

⁴² Norman Wirzba, “Reconciliation through Christ,” in *Making Peace with the Land: God’s Call to Reconcile with Creation*, eds. Fred Bahnson and Norman Wirzba (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012), 64.

Shepherd itself, rather than directing so many of our resources and so much effort to support programs run by other parishes and organizations.

In the quest to find something that could be authentically and uniquely ours, something that would make the best use of the gifts and resources God had given us, we turned repeatedly to the idea of feeding programs. In part this was a result of knowing that hunger is a perennial problem in our country and in part it was because we see ourselves as people who like to eat. It seemed like a good idea to share something that brought us joy.

As my concern about the property and the congregation's desire to start a new ministry grew, these parallel paths eventually came together around a single question: What should we do with our land? The logical next step was a discernment process, during which the question was refined even further to: What might God be inviting us to do with the land we have been given?

At first, I had general conversations with various parish leaders about what might be the best way to transform our land into something more welcoming, more productive, and more environmentally responsible. My own initial ideas centered on livestock: milk goats, chickens, and possibly honeybees. I knew there was enough space for these animals, and in my mind there would be both financial benefits and a significant boost to our visibility. Unfortunately, none of these animals were allowed by within the city limits of Town and Country, where our parish is located. In retrospect, getting my heart set on a certain path and then learning that it was impracticable created a dynamic similar to the "partial denial and redirection" model illustrated in the Book of Acts. There was no need to see the obstacles to that particular use of our property as a sign that God did not want

us to do anything with our land—it simply meant that my first impulse, as visionary and exciting as it had seemed, was not the right thing at the right time in the right place.

Further listening, consultation, and consensus-building was needed.

As the process continued, ideas discussed ranged from a community playground and to a dog park to a prayer labyrinth. But the concept that generated the most enthusiasm and sustained interest was a garden. Several parishioners, including some Vestry members, were experienced gardeners, so this felt like familiar ground. The garden won people over in part by being the least complicated option, at least in theory. There was also a wonderful energy that emerged as people began to envision how a garden could become a truly authentic outreach program. There was a stated desire to create something of our own, and a garden would certainly meet that desire.

Rogers argues that communal discernment requires participants

both to seek their own wisdom about God’s direction for community and to open themselves to the wisdom of the other participants. For the process to work, genuine dialogue must be present, and participants must develop inner freedom from captivity to their own certainties and ego needs.⁴³

At Good Shepherd a spirit of excitement and consensus developed out of a discernment process that, while informal in structure, was grounded in listening and respect, so that new ideas could be heard, processed, and adapted. The “genuine dialogue” we participated in was more than simple give-and-take; it allowed us to move forward in a way that was not dependent on one individual’s absolute vision or the certainty that we knew exactly where this was headed. The “inner freedom” we were gaining in the process meant that we could try something with no guarantee of a particular outcome, let

⁴³ Rogers, “Discernment,” in *Practicing Our Faith*, 111.

alone success—a serious marker that we were involved in discernment and as such, were beginning a serious engagement with this Christian practice.

Another aspect of discernment that came into play in the process at Good Shepherd was the question of timing. Consensus was building around the idea of a garden, a project that would use a portion of our land for growing food and giving it away. This consensus was marked by a spirit of empowerment and creativity, and was grounded in fidelity to Scripture. According to Rogers, these are some of the “normative criteria” that suggest a discernment process is guided by “authentic spiritual promptings.”

⁴⁴ Still, there was no clear agreement about when we should start this. Some wanted to jump right in as soon as weather would permit it; others felt that a lot more research, information gathering, and planning had to take place first, and that we should not start that growing season (2014) but wait a year until we had time to really do our homework. There was obvious merit in both strategies, as well as some drawbacks in each. It was difficult to know how to gain clarity over the pressing question, “Lord, is this the time?” (Acts 1:6)

The question of timing was resolved with the emergence of two necessary resources: people power and money. Like all good ideas, a church garden requires resources to move from abstraction to reality. The first inkling that the garden might make that quantum leap came when an anonymous donor designated \$10,000 for the purpose of creating and maintaining a vegetable garden on our property, the produce from which was to be given to the hungry. Obviously, it does not take \$10,000 to start a vegetable garden. However, the generosity of the grant had several important

⁴⁴ Rogers, “Discernment,” 112-113.

consequences: first, it allowed us to begin right away with a large plot, instead of starting very small and building up each year as first anticipated; second, it freed us completely from dependence on our deficit-burdened operating budget; and third, it gave us an incentive to stop talking and get to work as quickly as possible.

A small group of people with a strong interest in working on the garden in a hands-on way quickly rose took shape. Without further ado, they were dubbed the Shepherd Farm Steering Committee. These included a couple of the “usual suspects”—those parishioners who can always be counted on to volunteer their time and energy on any important work that needs to be done. But there were also some surprises, people whose involvement in the parish had been peripheral, and even one whose Sunday attendance was infrequent at best. We were blessed to have a professional arborist in the congregation, who was willing to share his expertise about planting, growing seasons, and soil management, as well as allowing us to use some of his professional equipment during the first phases of garden construction. In addition, two members of our Steering Committee had previously run a small farm. Another member of the committee was an avid home gardener. The rest of us were, to varying degrees, novices. I was probably the least experienced of the whole group.

It may seem like a bit of a leap to say that the prompt appearance of both abundant funding and people eager to work were “signs” that God wanted us to start a garden. But communities in discernment do need to look at practical issues in deciding both what to do and when to do it. If a church wants to start a garden but has no obvious land available, for instance, then a great deal of energy will go into just answering that first basic question. If possible solutions, like a small straw bale garden in a corner of the

parking lot, are tried and found wanting, then there may well come a point where the congregation has to recognize that these practical limitations are more a part of who they are than a series of obstacles to be overcome. The very impossibility of what they are trying to do might lead to further, more fruitful discernment, including questions such as: What else could this desire to garden signify? Should we find another church that has a garden and offer to help them? Is there some other ministry here that needs the kind of tending and cultivation that a garden requires and, if so, could we put this energy there? Is our deeper desire really about getting our hands dirty, doing something practical and tangible? Or is it about feeding people? Or creation care? Asking these kinds of questions can turn obstacles into real opportunities for learning.

When, on the other hand, apparent obstacles melt away without much effort, it is often a good indication that one is heading in the right direction. Such was the case when money and committed people materialized so quickly at Good Shepherd. Given that we already had plenty of land, moving forward began to feel almost inevitable. That is not to suggest that we ever achieved perfect unanimity of opinion about the garden; indeed, there were decidedly mixed feelings in the congregation about the undertaking. There were many who saw it as a lark or potentially even a folly. There was some whispered skepticism about whether or not it could work. Early concerns ranged from potential cost to the parish (it was pointed out that even with the grant money in hand, somebody would have to track any increase in our water usage and how much it cost), to the supposed impossibility of keeping deer from eating everything we planted. to the difficulty of finding enough people to care for the garden over the long haul.

“How many cans of beans could we buy for \$10,000?” This question was raised during a Vestry discussion about whether or not to accept the grant that had been designated for the creation and continuation of the garden. There was no apparent rancor in the question; rather it seemed to be motivated by a fair and reasonable desire for us to be rational and to do the math. If our stated purpose for the garden was to raise food (vegetables and herbs) for the hungry, and we were willing to spend \$10,000 to do that, shouldn’t we consider how much more food we might be able to give away if we used the money to buy inexpensive, imperishable canned goods? This question actually led to a deeply meaningful discussion about the purpose of the garden, and the idea that there might be more than one purpose. Our goal was to feed the hungry, yes. But we wanted to look at *how* we were feeding the hungry, and *what* we were feeding them, not simply *how much* we could gather and distribute to the hungry. Words like “relationship” and “connection” came to the fore in that discussion; at least those already in favor of the garden project believed that it would be a more personal and meaningful process to give away fresh food that we had grown ourselves rather than processed food we bought.

In the end it was important to return to reality from the realm of theory. The reality was that we were not being offered a \$10,000 grant to buy groceries. We could take it and use it to build the garden, or we could leave the money on the table. The discussion was incredibly fruitful, as we talked through issues like the nutritional quality of the food available in most food pantries, and the difficulty that many feeding programs had with affording fresh produce for the meals they offered. There was a general consensus that, even if the amount of food we produced turned out to be merely supplemental for the Peace Meal (the primary intended recipient for our produce), it

would still be providing a quality and type of food otherwise out of reach for them—and that mattered to us. Furthermore, there was a broad-based agreement that this was a meaningful and legitimate use of our land. If we could do some little bit of good with what we had, that would suffice; it was not necessary (or, obviously, possible) to try to end world hunger, but it was enough to provide some fresh greens and vine-ripened, hand-picked tomatoes to people who were hungry for such things.

Conclusion: Learning from the past and discerning our way into God’s purposes

Discernment was a necessary Christian practice for Good Shepherd to engage in in order to give Shepherd Farm a fighting chance of being embraced by the parish community, a community that had experienced more than its fair share of conflict, disappointment, and trauma in its recent history. Dykstra and Bass assert that when theologians assess not just the utility but the virtue of a particular Christian practice they

must ask not only whether it provides resources that seem helpful, but also whether what we find there is true, as far as we can discern, to the purposes of God. In a sense, each community of Christians in every generation is already engaged, implicitly or explicitly, in just such discernment. Inheriting much but also drawn into relationship with God in Christ in the present moment, they care for the sick, bury the dead, bring up children, tell stories, and make decisions, sometimes pausing in midstream to ask whether the form these activities take in their own time and place are faithful to God’s purposes.⁴⁵

I would contend that the form our decision making took was faithful to God’s purposes, in that it was inclusive, energizing, instructive, and based in a deep desire to obey God’s command to feed the hungry and respond to the needs of the “least among us.” I also have preliminary evidence that the practice that resulted from our discernment, church gardening, has been experienced by those who engage in it as drawing them closer to the purposes of God as well. Many of our survey respondents report that they pray for or in

⁴⁵ Dykstra and Bass, “A Theological Understanding,” in *Practicing Theology*, 17.

the garden. Most say that the spiritual impact on the congregation has been “mostly positive” or “very positive” (nobody gave it less than a “somewhat positive” rating). One survey respondent commented that working in the garden “deepened my trust in God and the fellow Christians in our congregation”; she also stated that she believes that the congregation understands the church as “more than a building or a fund of money” and that the garden “turns our eyes to God’s bounty.”

These responses are all indications that our discernment process and its outcome, grounded in prayer and continuing in prayer, have resulted in deeper trust in God, a more faithful perspective on the meaning and role of the church, and a great appreciation for God’s active presence in creation. The next chapter will consider how the practice of hospitality, already a valued priority in our community, thrived and grew thanks to our work with the garden.

Chapter Three

Hospitality and Making Room

In recent years the location of our church has been seen as an impediment to growth and our land as something of a burden. The first step in turning this perception around was a discernment process, imagining in an open-ended way all the many things we might be able to do with the land, as outlined in the Chapter Two. In the process of actually working the soil, a new appreciation for our land, as gift and possibility, began to take shape. The Christian practice that I associate most strongly with this change in perspective is hospitality. In this chapter I will consider a Biblical account of the concept of hospitality before moving into my own definition of hospitality as a Christian practice. Next I will explore how Good Shepherd worked on this practice both before and after we began the Shepherd Farm garden, and how the garden became an important embodiment of that practice for us. Finally I will discuss how the hospitality of the garden “made room” for me, helping me to become more connected to my parish and giving me a more expansive (and yet grounded) understanding of my role as priest.

A. Understanding Hospitality

1. Some Biblical context on hospitality

There are far too many examples of hospitality in the Bible to do justice to this topic in a project of this scope. It is important to understand, however, that our Christian practice of hospitality depends for its logic on the models espoused in both the Old and New Testaments. As Christine Pohl writes about the early church: “Hospitality both participated in and anticipated God’s hospitality. Christians offered hospitality in grateful

response to God's generosity and as an expression of welcome to Christ 'who for your sake was a stranger.'"⁴⁶ Old Testament exemplars of hospitality include: Abraham welcoming three mysterious strangers; the prophet Elijah and later Elisha being welcomed into the homes of widows; and the larger overarching narrative of the people of Israel, who are sometimes in exile, and therefore in the position of strangers or aliens themselves, and at other times are in charge of the land, with their own responsibilities to aliens and strangers. In the New Testament, questions of hospitality frequently center on table fellowship, as alluded to in the previous chapter's discussion of Peter's dream of eating clean and unclean animals, which led him to share worship and fellowship with supposedly unclean people. The focus of the ministry of Jesus is very much on welcoming those who are too often excluded from the household's hospitality: widows, orphans, tax collectors, the poor and sick, and sinners of all kinds. The Gospel is most explicit about this in Luke 14, when Jesus is part of a group eating together at the home of a Pharisee. He instructs his host that it would be better not to invite friends, family, or rich neighbors to such occasions but rather to "invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you" (Luke 14:12-15). This repeated theme in the Gospels serves as a consistent reminder to Christians that true hospitality, in the moral and ethical sense, must not be based on systems of reciprocity or employed for the enhancement of status.

To begin to get inside the particular definition of hospitality I am considering here, I will look at a text that might not seem obvious. Matthew 13:31-33 consists of two

⁴⁶ Christine D. Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 1999), 33.

short parables known as the Parable of the Mustard Seed and the Parable of the Leaven.

They are so brief that they can easily be quoted in whole:

He put before them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.” He told them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.”

These verses come at the end of a series of four parables and seem to form a hinge

between three agricultural parables, which all use a seed as the primary metaphor, and three later short parables that all use other types of objects: a treasure, a pearl, and a net.

In the first two, the kingdom of heaven is compared to a person who sows seeds, with varying results. In the third parable in the series, the comparison shifts from a person sowing seeds to the seed itself, specifically a mustard seed. The yeast (or leaven) in the fourth parable closely parallels the mustard seed: both are something tiny that transforms or develops into something large and nurturing. Both also serve as fascinating windows onto a Biblical understanding of hospitality.

The mustard seed, the object that is compared to the kingdom, has the potential to grow into an enormous, tree-like shrub, but according to the logic of this parable it requires someone to plant it in order for it to fulfill that destiny. Once it does grow, it is the very essence of natural hospitality: it provides a place for multiple birds to come and make their nests. Yeast has a similar dynamic potential; without leaven, no amount of flour can expand much beyond its inherent size or volume. But once the leaven is given a place in the flour, like the seed being given a place in the field, it expands and develops into something that is quite literally greater than the sum of its parts. The seed and the

leaven transform into shelter and food, which are the fundamental building blocks of hospitality.

Of course we must be cautious about analyzing parables too precisely or rigidly; it is their elasticity that gives them their power. It would unnecessarily limit exegetical options to claim that these parables are *exclusively* about hospitality or that they cannot be interpreted in other, equally fruitful ways. However, I do not think it is farfetched to see hospitality as a central interpretive lens for understanding these parables. In fact, given that hospitality in the form of table fellowship is such an animating force in the life and ministry of Jesus, it makes sense that it would play a primary role in his vision of the kingdom. This may even be what Jesus had in mind in his telling of these parables; perhaps he was offering a challenge for his followers to think about the necessity of practicing generous and faithful hospitality in order to participate in ushering in God's kingdom "on earth as it is in heaven."

Hospitality, then, can profitably be compared to either a small seed or a small amount of leaven. When people practice hospitality, limited resources can be shared in ways that make sure that everyone has enough. The mustard seed and especially the leaven are simple, mundane, domestic objects, suggesting that hospitality is basic to our existence, essential to common life, and anything but a rarified practice for the elite. This supports Christine Pohl's contention that hospitality "is not optional for Christians, nor is it limited to those who are specially gifted for it. It is, instead, a necessary practice in the community of faith."⁴⁷ The repeated use of common, everyday resources in Biblical depictions of hospitality (seed and leaven here, but elsewhere bread, water, oil, and so on)

⁴⁷ Christine Pohl, *Making Room*, 31.

draws an enticing connection between hospitality and sacrament. When such basic elements are employed in the sacraments as well as in acts of hospitality, God sanctifies our efforts and makes something more of them than what we could offer or create on our own.

2. Hospitality as a Christian practice

In her chapter on hospitality in *Practicing Our Faith*, Ana Maria Pineda defines hospitality as “the practice of providing a space where the stranger is taken in and known as one who bears gifts.”⁴⁸ Christine Pohl also focuses on the stranger as the intended recipient of hospitality, mostly in the form of a corrective; she notes that many people today are likely to think of hospitality primarily in terms of providing some form of welcome and entertainment to those they know rather than in terms of opening their homes or even their parish halls to strangers. She writes, “For the most part, the term ‘hospitality’ has lost its moral dimension and, in the process, most Christians have lost touch with the amazingly rich and complex tradition of hospitality.”⁴⁹ While I accept the premise that hospitality to strangers is a hallmark of Christian life and should be upheld as an ideal, for the sake of this project I want to make clear that I am working from a broader definition of hospitality, one that includes gestures of generosity and openness *within* a community, as well as one directed outward, to strangers.

I am not suggesting that we consider everyday, potentially superficial, or even status-seeking forms of hospitality as morally comparable to selfless and sacrificial acts, such as taking in a refugee family. The typical extravagant wedding reception featured in

⁴⁸ Pineda, “Hospitality,” in *Practicing Our Faith*, 31.

⁴⁹ Pohl, *Making Room*, 4.

glossy magazines is not an example of a Christian practice, no matter how much it is touted as displaying “hospitality” to its guests. Rather, my aim is to show that opening up a space for the good of others (whether or not they qualify as “strangers”), strengthening bonds within a community through shared work, and similar conventional forms of hospitality can overlap and interact in productive ways to create a robust Christian practice. I hope to illustrate how this works in more detail in section B below. Building on the work of Pineda and Pohl and influenced by experiences within my congregation and especially with our garden, my own working definition of hospitality as a Christian practice is: the practice of making room for another in a manner that requires sacrifice and enables the possibility of being changed by the encounter.

The idea of “making room” for another is the most straightforward part of this definition: we often picture hospitality as “a place at the table” or some similar image (a room for the night, a safe place to sleep, or somewhere to rest and be fed). In the Parable of the Mustard Seed, this image extends from the human realm into other areas of creation, as we see the tree making room for birds to nest in its branches. My insistence that some form of sacrifice is required may help distinguish the Christian practice of hospitality from the more superficial interaction we could instead label as “entertainment” (e.g., the glitzy wedding mentioned earlier), but only in part. The sacrifice involved does not have to be extraordinary; perhaps even in fairly ordinary social interactions we can said to be sacrificing time, money, and effort for the comfort and pleasure of those to whom we offer our hospitality. Clearly I can offer no concrete and precise measurement that distinguishes mere social niceties from true Christian practice, so perhaps it is more helpful to think of a spectrum of behaviors, with most

hospitable actions probably involving a complicated mixture of motivations and priorities. Nonetheless, the idea of sacrifice amplifies what it means to “make room,” to give out of one’s own store of resources in a generous and generative manner.

The final term of this definition is about transformation. Hospitality, as I understand it, should change us, or at least help us stay open to the possibility of being changed. The authors of a popular book on Benedictine hospitality wrote, “In human labor an astonishing thing happens: God shows up. As we prepare a place for others, something happens inside of us: we are prepared also.”⁵⁰ This is a good example of how hospitality is important to the person offering it and not just to the person receiving it. The person or group offering hospitality needs to maintain enough humility in their practice to recognize that, at its best, hospitality is more mutual than one-sided. Pohl makes a similar observation, using the traditional language of host and guest:

“Hospitality is good for everyone—good for hosts as well as for guests. The testimony of so many people who offer hospitality is that they ‘received more than they gave.’”⁵¹ This is one form that the change or transformation implicit in the practice can take: the person who offers hospitality can end up experiencing feelings of being welcome, fed, seen, and known.

Pohl makes a related point in acknowledging that not all of the potential impact on the host is positive. Besides the ever-present danger of burnout, practitioners of hospitality may need to rearrange priorities and become less invested in their personal possessions, schedules, and standards. Other changes may be about realizing limitations,

⁵⁰ Daniel Holman, OSB and Lonni Collins Pratt, *Radical Hospitality: Benedict’s Way of Love* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2002), 122.

⁵¹ Pohl, *Making Room*, 186.

recognizing the importance of boundaries, or even having one's heart broken over the sheer enormity of need and the paucity of appropriate resources. A person truly engaged in hospitality could find his or her political, cultural, or religious convictions challenged, and could have an unacknowledged prejudice or naiveté exposed to consciousness. The risk of change and transformation puts the practice of hospitality in the category of costly discipleship, to use Dietrich Bonhoeffer's phrase. Hospitality is costly not primarily because it requires us to utilize and possibly deplete our material resources, but because it puts us in the position to have our worldview or sense of self transformed.

In terms of Dykstra and Bass's definition of Christian practice, hospitality clearly qualifies. Hospitality addresses fundamental human needs, such as the need for shelter, food, and companionship. It is definitely important in Scripture and in the ministry of Jesus. It is a social and communal set of behaviors that can be practiced at home, in daily work, in the public realm, and in church. In these and many other ways it conforms to the primary qualities of Christian practices as defined by Dykstra and Bass.

Perhaps most strikingly, hospitality "comes to a focus in worship."⁵² The normative form of Sunday worship in the Episcopal Church is Holy Eucharist, and issues of hospitality are central to the Eucharist. At every celebration of the Eucharist some form of the words of institution are said: "This is my body...this is my blood...do this in remembrance of me." When Christ breaks the bread and offers it to his disciples, and when the priest does the same in Christ's place, the ultimate example of hospitality is being made real in human history and in people's lives. Christ did not offer mere nourishment, nor even the gifts of acceptance and community, but rather he offered

⁵² Dykstra and Bass, "A Way of Thinking," in *Practicing our Faith*, 205.

himself, broken for the world. Our very identity as Church is constituted in the transformation that takes place: by receiving Christ's body, by being open to his act of sacrificial hospitality, we are made his Body. This pattern of offering, receiving, and transformation that is enacted around the altar should and can become the pattern of life in the church; practices of hospitality performed outside of the Eucharist can nevertheless become Eucharistic acts, ways of extending the Body of Christ out into a world hungry for transformation and communion.

Next I will look at how the Shepherd Farm garden was one way for our congregation to embody and live out the Christian practice of hospitality.

B. Hospitality and Making Room for a Garden

1. Preparing the Soil: Getting started

The process of creating and caring for Shepherd Farm meets my definition of hospitality as a Christian practice. Giving generously of our material resources and our time was the first step in this practice of hospitality. Furthermore, through our work in the garden we made room for new relationships within the parish, with people in other congregations, and with people previously unknown to us in our neighborhood. Beyond that, we made room for a new, riskier, more hospitable relationship with our land: in the past the primary "relationship" the community had with the land was transactional and functional, whereas through the garden the relationship became one of care and attention. In the following sections I will show that we were changed by the hospitable practice of gardening, in ways large and small.

When we made the decision to start a garden we did not have all our questions or concerns answered. We were not sure if we had enough money, expertise, or even people

to make the garden a success. The only thing we knew we had in abundance was land. And—here is the crucial part—using even a portion of the land for this purpose meant that we had to, in a very real sense, let go of it. We had to cede control. Land that had nearly been lost, forcibly taken away in fact, held a deep symbolic and emotional power for the congregation. It makes sense that asking the leaders of the congregation to stop simply holding on to the land and instead to find a way to make use of it would be a potentially threatening and upsetting move. It speaks well of the spiritual maturity of the congregation that they were able to handle the stress of this decision without undue anxiety or conflict. To be clear, anxiety and conflict did arise, but they were handled competently and did not lead to rupture of relationships or widespread discontent. This movement of the heart, from an anxious holding on to a generous letting go, made the garden possible; it is also fundamental to the Christian practice of hospitality.

That this radical gesture of hospitality was even possible may be due to the fact that the parish had been intentional about practicing hospitality in other less radical forms for a number of years. When I arrived at Good Shepherd the people of the congregation made it clear to me that hospitality at coffee hour—including homemade baked goods every Sunday—was a source of pride and identity. This community time was set up with great attention to detail, so that a guest would feel they were invited to participate in a treat, something savored by the congregation that they were happy to share with others. It would often happen that there were no guests, and so the parish was essentially being hospitable to its own members. Perhaps this was not as much of a negative as it might first sound, however. Sometimes Christian practices really do need to be “practiced”

inside the community, however haltingly and imperfectly, before they can be made manifest to the outside.

Sadly it is not a given that members of a congregation will all behave hospitably toward one another, but if they do not at least begin by practicing such internal hospitality it seems unlikely that they will have much success when they try to move hospitality beyond the walls of the parish. Pineda argues that one of the reasons our churches need to relearn the art of hospitality is that our middle-class American way of life, with all of its busyness and stress, pushed the practice to the sidelines in nearly every arena, including in church. She writes,

Ironically, it is not just hospitality to the “stranger” that is in peril in our society. We are short not only of tables that welcome strangers but even of tables that welcome friends. [...] In many busy families, children find no after-school welcome home, and spouses find little time to host one another over supper. And when we become estranged—separated by grievances large or small, or simply crowded out of one another’s lives—we all too often become “strangers” even to those we once loved. Can we move beyond strangeness and estrangement to learn the skills of welcoming one another and to claim the joy of homecoming?⁵³

In light of this insight, perhaps the seemingly innocuous and almost trivial practice of a generous and bountiful Coffee Hour was more significant than it first appeared. It was as if the congregation were keeping their hospitality muscles in good working order, even if a larger purpose for that hospitality had not yet been discerned. The homemade goodies were an outward symbol, but the real grace was in people taking time after church to sit and talk, to catch up on the week’s events, rather than rushing off to the next activity. We did not want to become strangers to others in our faith household. This was increasingly counter-cultural behavior, even if it was never named as such.

⁵³ Pineda, “Hospitality,” in *Practicing Our Faith*, 32.

Even after having laid the foundation of hospitality as a key characteristic of our community, it was no small matter for Good Shepherd to take its practice of hospitality to the next level. Given our congregation's history, there is little that is more precious to us than our property, the ground under our feet. The congregation did not cling to it solely out of selfishness or anxiety. Having come so close to losing it, they did not take its existence or their possession of it for granted. But Christianity teaches that sacrificial giving requires us to give away precisely that which we most value, and to give more than is asked of us. The shift that began during our discernment process (see chapter 2), and is still an ongoing transition in our community, was to move from seeing the land as our property, rightfully returned to us, to seeing the land as God's property, loaned to us for the benefit of others.

Experimenting with a garden on a small portion of our property may not appear to be clear evidence of this shift, but I do believe it was a step in that direction. By saying "yes" to the garden we were affirming our belief that the land, or at least some portion of it, could be used in such a way that would not profit us directly, that would inevitably use up time and energy that could have been put to other goals or programs, and that would only be of service to people who were unlikely to ever attend our church, donate money, spread the word about our generosity through social media, or even set foot on the property. In other words, we had nothing material to gain from the garden. Rather our goal was to share to land that had been given back to us, to work hard at making it productive, and then to give away all that it produced. We were literally giving back the

first fruits of what God had given us, although we had never thought of first fruits in such a literal way before.⁵⁴

2. Hospitality and transformation in the garden

Almost as soon as Shepherd Farm garden began, parishioners who spent time working in it noticed that it created a new sense of belonging, of being a part of our neighborhood. The lawn, which had been such a seamless expanse of grass, now had a major feature on it, a focal point. The twin defenses of sameness and distance had been breached. Christine Pohl writes, “Hospitality begins at the gate, in the doorway, on the bridges between public and private space. Finding and creating threshold places is important for contemporary expressions of hospitality.”⁵⁵ This is a key function for the church garden. It is exactly a “threshold” space, existing as it does on the church property but not inside a building. It serves as a kind of bridge between the neighborhood and the church itself; we found repeatedly that people who lived nearby, who had never set foot in the church, were interested in making contact with those of us working in the garden. Often they just stayed for a few minutes to hear about what was happening in the garden, but some stayed longer or were repeat visitors. Of course it was especially positive for all involved when we could offer them tomatoes or green beans to take home with them as a small gesture of neighborliness. One teenager who lives only a short walk away found out about our garden and asked if she could work in the garden in order to fulfill her service requirement for school. She became one of our hardest-working volunteers, arriving early and staying late, and enthusiastically taking on jobs that were difficult or

⁵⁴ See, for example, Deuteronomy 26:1-2.

⁵⁵ Pohl, *Making Room*, 95.

just plain tedious. She has also become one of our fastest learners, always asking good and thoughtful questions. There can be little doubt that her presence has been a major morale boost for parish gardeners, giving many of us a feeling that we were reaching out beyond our boundaries in a new and exciting way. She has still never set foot inside the church, but the threshold space of the garden has been welcoming to her and has allowed us to receive the gifts she has to offer.

Some of the respondents to the parish survey mentioned this specific aspect of the Shepherd Farm garden—its ability to attract other people to the parish, not as new members but as interested and involved neighbors—as being especially meaningful to them. One parishioner wrote, “I’ve been so impressed with people outside of Good Shepherd who are drawn somehow to garden—I love to hear their stories.” Another opined, “I can think of several occasions where an individual who visited was offered the opportunity to pray with us—or was asked permission by us to pray for them.” This demonstrates the porous and interactive nature of Christian practices, and shows again how gardening can become one of those practices, if the spirit of hospitality is already at work in the people and the garden.

Dykstra and Bass assert that a key marker of a Christian practice is that, together with other practices, it “is part of a way of life that participates in the active Life of God for creation, for our neighbors, and for ourselves.”⁵⁶ A garden is not intrinsically a welcoming or hospitable place; although many people are drawn to gardens, stepping foot into someone else’s garden for the first time can be intimidating for the stranger or the uninitiated, much as some churches can be (whether or not that is their intention).

⁵⁶ Dykstra and Bass, “A Way of Thinking,” in *Practicing Our Faith*, 205.

However, a garden that is approached as a form of Christian practice will become a place of welcome. If the parishioners working in the Shepherd Farm garden had been “all business,” for instance, focusing only on productivity and efficiency, they could not have taken the time to engage with the neighbors and others who stopped by the garden. They might have welcomed the bodily labor of the teenage volunteer but not necessarily her inquisitiveness and constant desire to learn through questions and conversation. They might have given people who stopped by pamphlets or information, but they might not have offered prayer and free produce. These hospitable behaviors and attitudes, never part of an overt evangelism strategy, were authentic and spontaneous results of the spirit of hospitality that both birthed the garden and became stronger through it.

Norman Wirzba’s work argues that it is in the nature of gardening to create this kind of hospitality, because gardening is in God’s nature. The image of God as gardener, which he finds repeatedly in Scripture, reminds us that

the divine creative activity is fundamentally about “making room” for others to be and to flourish. Garden work is a form of hospitality in which the focus is on the welcome and wellbeing of others. [...] Created in the image of God, humanity’s highest calling is to witness to the hospitality that God first demonstrated in planting the world.⁵⁷

We made room on our land for this garden, turned much of our focus to the welcome and wellbeing of others, and in the process received a steady stream of assurance that we were answering a calling that brought us closer to the heart of God. Shepherd Farm garden embodies hospitality because it is a generous and selfless use of land that belongs to the parish, land that had been contested and nearly lost, but is now being offered for the good of others and to the glory of God. Besides the food that is given away (more

⁵⁷ Wirzba, *Food and Faith*, 50.

than 4,000 pounds by the end of our second season), the practice of hospitality in the garden produces a new neighborliness and connection with the people who live near the church but with whom we have never before felt ourselves to be in relationship. The lines between our communities are becoming blurred. This new sense of connection and community is the way that the practice of hospitality is transforming us, the congregation: our focus was on giving away something that we possessed, on helping others, and in the process we too were and are offered friendship, assistance, and encouragement.

C. From Wilderness to Garden: A personal journey

In the final section of this chapter I will investigate an aspect of hospitality that I have not seen discussed prominently in other literature on the subject, one revealed to me gradually through my involvement with the Shepherd Farm garden. This is the way that a particular place can offer hospitality—not only the people *in* the place, but the place itself. This is hinted at in some of the writing on hospitality as a Christian practice, such as in this passage from *Radical Hospitality*: “The work you do that prepares a home or a building or a yard to welcome others is very important work. It is holy work.”⁵⁸ While these authors wisely connect this form of hospitality to the promise of Jesus that he goes ahead to make a place for us (John 14:2), their emphasis is still on the human work of preparation more than on places being hospitable in and of themselves. What I want to explore in this section is closer to what agrarian writers would call a sense of place or a theology of place. It is in grasping this sense of place that one begins to develop what Wendell Berry has famously called an “ecological intelligence.”⁵⁹ I will use my own

⁵⁸ Homan and Pratt, *Radical Hospitality*, 127.

⁵⁹ Berry, *Standing by Words* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 1983), 125.

experience of learning to feel welcomed and at home in the garden as my primary example.

In contemplating how my relationship, as priest and pastor, changed during the first year of Shepherd Farm's life, I stumbled on a simple truth: it is detrimental to parish ministry for the parish priest to feel no love for or connection to the place where that ministry occurs. In the Episcopal Church the normative local form of ministry is bound by geography—a parish. Even if a strict understanding of parish boundaries no longer governs where people worship, it still follows that being a parish priest ought to entail being connected in a deep and abiding way with a particular locality. It requires, in other words, a sense of place. I am not sure that many of our clergy today ever think of “a sense of place” as part of their calling. I know that I did not until after I began to work in the Shepherd Farm garden.

Before the garden, my sense of my parish *as place* was highly abstracted. I understood from the time I accepted the call to Good Shepherd that I needed to learn about the people in my congregation, and our socio-demographic context. And yet I could not have told you a thing about the land on which we were located. Walking across the parking lot on my way in to the office or the church, I could not have told you which way was east, or what part of the property got the most sun during the day. I did not know that the shrubs that bordered the lot were actually an invasive, non-native species of honeysuckle. I did not know if the people who cut our lawn were using fertilizers, or weed killers, or any other kinds of poison. The list of things I did not know seems endless to me in retrospect. My ignorance was so total that for more than two years it did not even occur to me that these were things I ought to know. Certainly these were not issues I

ever heard discussed while I was getting my master's degree in theology, or in any clergy gathering, continuing education opportunity, or advanced degrees program classes in which I participated. This suggests that I am not alone in having approached my place of ministry as if it were not in fact a place, but a gathering of souls that could be any place, or no place at all.

The point is that real love must be based in knowledge. We cannot love what we do not know. The landscapes in my imagination, the ones I know, are the places where I grew up, and they are wilderness landscapes: rainforest, foothill, and ocean. The landscape where I live and work is a suburban landscape built up on top of old farmland. While not everyone in my congregation is from the community where we worship, most of them are from geographically and topographically similar places—they are Midwesterners, for the most part, or from somewhat similar areas in the South. My childhood was spent in the foothills of northern California, the rainforests of Micronesia, and the beaches of Hawaii.

A perpetual transplant, I thought it was just fine to love the people of my parish while not much liking or caring about the place where my parish was located. This makes no sense to me now, but it was true. I thought it was immaterial to my ministry that I found St. Louis and the region around it drab, even a little ugly. And it was “immaterial,” in one sense—it was disdainful of the material and incarnational nature of ministry. But if I thought it was irrelevant, I was sorely mistaken. As Wendell Berry writes,

I do not mean any kind of abstract love, which is probably a contradiction in terms, but particular love for particular things, places, creatures, and people, requiring stands and acts, showing its successes or failures in practical or

tangible effects. And it implies a responsibility just as particular, not grim or merely dutiful, but rising out of generosity.⁶⁰

I had taken a vow as a priest to “love and serve the people among whom I work,” and while I took that vow very seriously I was nonetheless under the postmodern American cultural delusion that love was something that could be separated from place. Putting it back in place, so to speak, did indeed require “stands and acts” that would result in “practical and tangible effects.” That is not all it required, for certainly there are many intangible ways that a priest serves a community. But working in the garden changed my understanding of what it means to love and to serve.

Like more and more Americans, I have moved frequently throughout my life and have also moved from one religious home (the Roman Catholic Church) to another (the Episcopal Church). Perhaps because of these experiences, my tendency has been to believe that a sense of exile is appropriate for Christians. Our tradition has much in it to support this way of seeing a life of faith. Douglas E. Christie writes beautifully about the tension in the Christian monastic tradition between stability (“the power of long and deep commitment to place to form and shape one’s consciousness”) and detachment (“the kind of knowledge that can only be acquired by leaving one’s place and risking the unknown”).⁶¹ He makes the point that in our “highly mobile, technologized, and urban world” many of us feel a sense of “chronic placelessness.”⁶² If that is the case, and I

⁶⁰ Wendell Berry, “A Promise Made in Love, Awe, and Fear,” *Moral Ground: Ethical Action for a Planet in Peril*, Kathleen Dean Moore and Michael P. Nelson, eds. (San Antonio, TX: Trinity University Press, 2010), 388

⁶¹ Douglas E. Christie, *The Blue Sapphire of the Mind: Notes for a Contemplative Ecology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 103.

⁶² Christie, *The Blue Sapphire of the Mind*, 105.

believe it is, then we may need to help swing the pendulum back toward rootedness, even if long-term stability is not an option for many individuals because of economic pressures, education opportunities, and so forth. My own experience suggests that participating in meaningful shared work within a community can be a major factor in claiming that rootedness, and that specifically working in a garden creates opportunities for welcome and connection that tie one more deeply to a place.

For many years I believed that the Church was the one constant in my life, the place I felt at home no matter where I lived. I am beginning to see that as a rather incomplete kind of spirituality, one that mirrors in some ways the Socratic-influenced, Gnostic-fueled dualism that Norman Wirzba calls “a profoundly anti-Christian way of understanding the world.”⁶³ Of course it is wonderful to feel that one is part of the Church universal, and even to know a deep, sincere connection to the reality of the Church as the Body of Christ. But that body cannot be disembodied. We are not members of the Church Abstract; still less can we be pastors of such a figment. We can only be members of a particular church in a particular time and place, ministering with particular people. And *place* is surely not the least among those particularities.

Not finding beauty in the place I worked was actually a kind of spiritual crisis for me. I am used to living in places where I can step outside my door and be filled with wonderment and awe. Perhaps it was a form of aesthetic entitlement; at some level I believed that the natural world was there to dazzle me. It had done so since I was a young child and I had imagined it would always go on doing so. Living now in a place where it is often too hot or too cold, too buggy or too humid, a place where there are neither

⁶³ Wirzba, *Making Peace with the Land*, 18.

mountains nor oceans nor many wide-open spaces, has been a huge challenge. I have been like a spoiled child: what is the *point* of going outside if it's not going to *feed* me? What is there to *look at*? How am I supposed to find God *here*, anyway?

The hospitality of the garden changed all that. I made room in my heart for the garden, and the garden made room for me. Or perhaps it worked in the other direction. All I know is that it does not take too many hours or days of working in a garden before you really *care* about it. The writer bell hooks uses the word “interbeing” to describe the “union of plant and human”⁶⁴ and that, in my estimation, is the dynamic heart of a garden. One of the parishioners I interviewed reported that, although she grew up in Iowa surrounded by farms and then spent her whole working life in the agricultural industry, she was still surprised by how much working in the Shepherd Farm garden has had an impact on her spiritual life and her sense of belonging in the parish. What surprised her most was that her sense of belonging is greatest when she spends time alone in the garden. She put it this way: “Whether I’m out there with other people or whether I’m out there by myself, it’s a different experience. I sometimes enjoy being there by myself more and staking up those dang tomato plants and mumbling under my breath. [...] In a way, that was as fulfilling as the Saturday mornings with a lot of people there. You know, the sunflowers for goodness sake: wow! Look at how beautiful they are. It just kind of makes you stop and realize how much you don’t know about what God has given us.” She and I both experienced something akin to a relationship with the plants and the place where they grow, as if they were welcoming us in to work and pray.

⁶⁴ hooks, *Belonging: A Culture of Place* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 115.

Robert Pogue Harrison writes, “There are no states of soul that do not have their proper place in the world; and if there were no places in the world there would be no soul in it either.”⁶⁵ This was the conversion that happened to me in the garden: I went from having no proper place in the world to acknowledging that my place is where I have been called to love and serve these particular people at this particular time. Loving the land where my parish resides has become an important part of loving the parish—the place and the people. As long as I had no connection to that place, I could see myself (however subconsciously) as a transient leader, not a good shepherd or even a good gardener but a hired hand (John 10:12). The garden taught me to build community from the ground up, because there is no other way. In other words, the garden taught me—or, more properly, is teaching me—how to be a priest.

My experience of clergy colleagues is that most of us care deeply about our congregations and cures. We believe we have been called to the people we serve. We may understand intellectually how tending a garden could be a wonderful metaphor for caring for a congregation, but most of us have likely never been challenged to tend to an actual garden as a way to care more deeply for our congregations. However, if the Gospel teaches anything, it is that love is transformative. If you love the little plot of earth where your congregation meets and worships, hold funerals and celebrates babies, eats potlucks and hosts recovery meetings—if you love that place, you are going to find your love for the people strengthened and renewed.

The hospitality of the Shepherd Farm garden meant that my “mustard seed” of hours spent working there, usually not more than once or twice a week, blossomed into a

⁶⁵ Harrison, *Gardens*, 125.

full-blown love of the garden and transformed my relationship with the people I have been called to serve. The basic elements of time and attention I was able to give were sanctified by God, made into a deeper spirit of belonging and commitment. Hospitality as a Christian practice finds a natural outlet in the garden, a place where people of different skills, abilities, and temperaments all have the opportunity to give and to grow.

D. Conclusion: The challenge of (up)rootedness

There are corrupting undercurrents to a sense of place and even to practices of hospitality that I must acknowledge before concluding this chapter. A sense of place, for instance, can also lead to parochialism, to defensiveness about boundaries and who “belongs” in that place, and ultimately even to the kind of ongoing conflict and war we see in the Middle East. Amy Plantinga Pauw reminds us how important it is to “mind the gaps” between our beliefs and our practices.⁶⁶ The existence of these gaps does not prove the hopeless hypocrisy of religious communities and individuals, but it does demonstrate all too well that human beings are imperfect and so our practices, however well-intentioned, are imperfect too. Certainly the hospitality offered by the Shepherd Farm garden is imperfect. Our belief is that all people are welcome in the garden. The reality is that our gardeners are nearly all white, middle class, and Episcopalian. We give generously of our land, our time, and our resources, but there are still inescapable moments when the shadow of *noblesse oblige* rears its ugly head, when the feeling arises that we are carting our precious organic vegetables off to the poor and downtrodden, rather than drawing together as one Body around a field and a table open to all. This gap, these shadows, are not what we intend. But they exist nonetheless.

⁶⁶ Pauw, “Attending to the Gaps between Beliefs and Practices,” *Practicing Theology*, 33-48.

If our hospitality, even in the garden, is imperfect, that tells me that we have room to grow, and it reminds me of the necessity of falling on the mercy and grace of God so that we might continue to do better. Few writers have exposed the connection between racism and place better than bell hooks, and I have been profoundly moved by the essays in which she struggles with her own sense of alienation and her return to the land of her birth. On the one hand, there is a universal message in her story: “When we love the earth, we are able to love ourselves more fully.”⁶⁷ Yes. My own experience has taught me the truth of this. On the other hand, she deftly exposes the racism that worked to separate African-Americans from an agrarian way of life and the relative financial self-sufficiency, as well as strong family and community ties, it afforded them. She writes, for example: “Recalling the legacy of our ancestors who knew that the way we regard land and nature will determine the level of our self-regard, black people must reclaim a spiritual legacy where we connect our well-being to the well-being of the earth.”⁶⁸ Such issues are absolutely critical for churches and churches gardens to confront at this time and especially in the context of Good Shepherd’s location. The whole world knows of the racial inequities and injustices in St. Louis, Missouri.

More about this issue of minding the gaps will be covered in the next chapter, but for now let me conclude by suggesting that it is by this attention to gaps that the garden could become, at least for some, a catalyst to activism. Living in an area where it is so hard to connect people of different races to common work can alert us to systemic racism and the need to interrogate the white privilege that gives our congregation access to land

⁶⁷ hooks, *Belonging*, 35.

⁶⁸ hooks, *Belonging*, 40.

and resources in the first place. With all this in mind, I continue to believe that a church garden can be a part of the solution in meaningful and even subversive ways. While we might not be able to single-handedly dismantle racism or undo the ills of our industrial economy, we can create an expectation that gardens are free and abundant across the land, in churches with big spaces but also in churches that can do no more than cultivate a few straw bales in a corner of the parking lot. That way the people who are most vulnerable to displacement and dislocation would still be able to connect to land and place, because wherever they go there will be a garden waiting for them, welcoming their participation and beckoning them to “Come and eat.”

From the practice of hospitality I will now turn to the final practice to be considered in this project, the practice of shaping communities.

Chapter Four

Shaping Community from the Ground Up

Good Shepherd was a close-knit congregation from before my arrival there, and yet the community that we shaped through our work in the Shepherd Farm garden was demonstrably both broader and deeper than it had been before. This chapter will illustrate how we made new connections with groups and individuals outside of our parish as well as forging deeper connections within the congregation, thus expanding our sense of community in both directions. Also, to develop an idea that I began to explore in the chapter on hospitality, I will continue to show that at least for some of us a sense of relationship with the land became meaningful enough that the garden itself, down to the actual plants it contains and even the soil itself, was now included in our understanding of community.

A. Understanding Community

1. Some Biblical context on community

As with issues of discernment and hospitality, community is a major theme in the Bible, far too large and complex to be addressed adequately in this project. So, much as I have done in previous chapters, I will examine in depth only one passage of Scripture, in this case the depiction of community in the second chapter of Genesis. This text portrays the Biblical ideal of community as the harmonious interconnection and interactions among God, humanity, and all the rest of creation. Consideration of this passage in particular allows me to consider how that ideal can shape and guide the way Christians develop communities today.

Several notable issues cry out for attention in this chapter's depiction of community. First, both human and plant life have the same source: God, yes, but God working through the soil. God creates humankind by pulling us out of the dirt of the earth, *adamah* (which Ellen F. Davis consistently translates as "fertile soil")⁶⁹ much the same way that he pulls out all the plants, trees, and indeed the water needed to sustain life. The implication is clear that since we are all made out of the same stuff and have the same maker, Yahweh, we must be deeply connected, even in an important sense related. This interconnectedness gives shape and meaning to our lives. Plants and herbs were not created until after a human being was made who could "till the ground" (verse 5); trees are "pleasant to the sight and good to eat" (verse 9), attributes of plant life that only make sense if people are there to see them and to take nourishment from them. This is the beginning of community as a kind of benign, even productive, symbiosis—plants need people to fulfill their purpose, even as people need plants both to use and enjoy.

Human purpose is also tied to the existence of other creatures and the land, as is made explicit in verse 15: "And the LORD God took the man, and put him into the garden of Eden to till it and keep it." Those final two verbs in the sentence are crucial, as the work of Ellen Davis demonstrates. She argues that the first verb, commonly rendered "to till," is probably better translated as "work for," in a sense that is related to words of service and servanthood. Davis concludes that this passage is clearly implying that "the

⁶⁹ See for example "Reading the Bible through Agrarian Eyes" in *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture*, 21-61, and "Knowing Our Place on Earth: Learning Environmental Responsibility from the Old Testament," in *The Green Bible* (NY: HarperCollins, 2008), 59-64.

soil is worthy of our service.”⁷⁰ The second verb, the one the NRSV translates as “keep,” does not connote ownership or property as English speakers might suppose; rather, it generally has something to do with preservation and observation, with the added sense of learning from and respecting something. Davis finally translates this verse as, “And YHWH God took the human and set him in the garden of Eden to work and serve it, to preserve and observe it.”⁷¹ So, in sum, we are put on this earth to care for, learn from, and live in relationship with creation. And because we are a part of creation, that includes caring for, learning from, and living in relationship with one another.

The ideal community proposed in Genesis, then, is formed around relations and habits of life that prioritize caring, serving, and living in a way that honors our deep interdependence. God made human being to care for the garden. People have a tendency to see it the other way around, to think that the garden of Eden was put there to supply humanity with food, shelter, and a life of leisure and plenty. But that is not what the text tells us at all. Far from being the pinnacle of all creation, the reason that everything else exists, humanity is an integral part of something much larger. Like a master craftsman God shapes us from the dirt of the earth (“remember that you are dust,” as Episcopalians are reminded at least once a year) and then God puts us somewhere to do something—he places us in the garden so that we can take care of it and help it to grow.

Of course much of the rest of Scripture is occupied with how human beings have attempted to live up to this ideal, or have completely ignored this ideal, or have forgotten this ideal, or have in some other way fallen short. As Davis succinctly puts it, “Israel

⁷⁰ Davis, *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture*, 29.

⁷¹ Davis, *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture*, 30-31.

knows nothing of religious obligation or spiritual experience that is abstracted from the daily business of living responsibly in community with others.”⁷² I will not have opportunity to develop this argument sufficiently here, but it does not seem a stretch to say that the New Testament writers, steeped as they were in the Jewish Scriptures, worked from the same set of assumptions. Holding onto the ideal, indeed the archetype, set forth in the second chapter of Genesis led early Christian theologians to posit Jesus as the new Adam, the most fully human person in history. Jesus himself called together a new community based on an old ethic of servanthood, healing, and love.

2. Community shaping as a Christian practice

Strongly implied in the Biblical accounts of community is the understanding that, while our membership in community (or even communities) is a given in life, the quality of that community requires work and attention if it is to be live-giving and productive. A good community does not just happen because a number of nice people are living in the same place at the same time. Indeed, the “goodness” of individuals within the community probably matters far less to the ultimate character of a community than the communal practices, behaviors, and pursuits in which they engage. In short, communities need to be shaped. In his chapter in *Practicing Our Faith*, Larry Rasmussen makes his case for “shaping communities” as itself a Christian practice:

The shaping of communities is the practice by which we agree to be reliable personally and organizationally. This practice takes on life through roles and rituals, laws and agreements—indeed, through the whole assortment of shared commitments and institutional arrangements that order common life. In one sense, then, shaping communities is not just a single practice of its

⁷² Davis, “Knowing Our Place on the Earth,” in *The Green Bible*, 62.

own. It is the practice that provides the choreography for all the other practices of a community or society.⁷³

His understanding of this practice, while broad, is not without focus. Those committed to intentionally shaping the community in which they live or worship will need to engage such issues as structure, leadership, and governance. Rasmussen is heavily influenced by Ronald Heifetz and his work on “adaptive leadership,”⁷⁴ as well as recommending that churches wishing to shape their common life in productive, life-giving, and intentional ways will gain specific insights and workable models from the examples of Jesus and the early Christians.

Rasmussen offers a mostly convincing argument for seeing the Church as an alternative community where “authority” and “servanthood” are “wholly reimagined,”⁷⁵ and he is clear that a Christian practice of shaping communities would have particular goals, aiming for a community that is radically inclusive, egalitarian, and that honors the variety of gifts embodied in its members. All of which seems basically in line with the Biblical vision of community outlined in the preceding section. The crucial piece missing from his discussion of community is any inclusion of, or even concern with, the created order beyond humankind. Plants, animals, and the rest of creation are wholly absent from Rasmussen’s vision of “radical inclusivity.” My own understanding of how communities are shaped requires us to think in much less abstract and more grounded terms. A community has to *be somewhere* to engage in practices, even if the “place” where it

⁷³ Rasmussen, “Shaping Communities,” in *Practicing our Faith*, 117-130.

⁷⁴ See for example Heifetz, *Leadership Without Easy Answers* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994).

⁷⁵ Rasmussen, “Shaping Communities,” 124.

exists is in cyberspace. As Christians who find their authority in Scripture and tradition as well as reason, our location in the created world should be one of the acknowledged influences that shape us. Furthermore, we should choose which practices we allow to shape us in large part by discerning whether they are building up or tearing down the rest of creation.

It would have been unthinkable for writers of the Bible to leave out the issue of land when considering how our communities are shaped and how we ought to make decisions about leadership, ordering, and accountability (or “reliability,” to use Rasmussen’s word). Ellen Davis has shown that a faithful reading of the Bible requires us to acknowledge the agrarian perspective of those who wrote it; she even goes so far as to say that their vision of “heaven and earth” was a close parallel to what Aldo Leopold famously called “the land community.” There is simply no way to separate “community” from “the land.” She includes in the basic elements of the Bible’s “theological land ethic” these two assumptions: “that humans and land exist in a biotic unity before God [and] that their unity has identifiable moral dimensions (faithful action, truth, righteousness).”⁷⁶ Leaving land, location, a sense of place, or even the more general category of “creation” out of his discussion of how we shape communities, Rasmussen has missed an opportunity to present both a more holistic and a more authentic understanding of a key Christian practice or set of practices.

B. Gardening as a Community-Shaping Practice

In one of his more striking sections, Larry Rasmussen writes this about Christian community: “Discipleship (joining the way of Jesus) is decidedly egalitarian. People who

⁷⁶ Davis, *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture*, 26

are routinely excluded elsewhere are included here. Pride of rank is rejected and has no place. Followers are to teach all they have learned to all who will hear, but no particular deference is given scribes as teachers.”⁷⁷ This may sound like an impossible ideal in many congregations, especially in a denomination as hierarchical and tradition-bound as the Episcopal Church. But in our garden this was precisely how things worked. Young and old alike were included, and as soon as one person learned how to do something, they became teachers to any new person who walked through the gates. There was no single person in charge of the garden, and the only requirement for inclusion was a willingness to be there.

1. Shared leadership, servant leadership

It is especially important to note here that my leadership was not central to the garden on a day-to-day basis. I was one worker among workers, to the point where sometimes members of the garden team would tease me that I wrote and talked about the garden more than I actually gardened. There was some truth to this. Another gardener would sometimes chase me off when I showed up on Saturdays because she knows that is generally my only day off. More important than the hours I did or did not spend in the garden, and whether or not they were considered official work hours, was the universally acknowledged fact that I was not in the garden as an expert. My book learning and theological insights were of little value in figuring out how to deal with cabbage worms and recalcitrant carrots. I made it clear to the whole congregation that we were not starting Shepherd Farm because I was really into gardening. The plan was not for me to lead the way forward boldly, with my sheep following in my every footstep. In fact, it

⁷⁷ Rasmussen, “Shaping Communities,” 123

was almost the exact opposite. When we started, I knew almost nothing about gardening, and I had to learn step by step, inch by inch, day by day, from my parishioners.

Nor do I want to give the impression that I was the spiritual guru while others were worker bees (to mix a metaphor quite atrociously). It was not just the practical aspects of gardening but the spiritual aspects as well that the more experienced gardeners already knew better than I, although it was something we talked about rarely and obliquely. But in watching them at work I could see how their garden work spilled over into their approach to church and life. These were the people who clearly knew the benefits of slowing down, of paying attention, and of putting absolute trust in a process outside of their control. They did not show undue stress when certain plants did not produce as expected, or when there were so many cherry tomatoes coming in at once that we could not keep up with the harvest and ended up with as many squished underfoot as in our baskets. I learned from them what a “non-anxious presence” really looked like. I learned from them to take my cues from the garden, instead of arriving with an agenda and sticking to it no matter what.

My enthusiasm for all of this was often a source of amusement. One of my fellow gardeners laughed about my heartfelt, life-changing epiphany that a baby Brussels sprout plant would bear the discernible image of a mature Brussels sprout. What was a profound spiritual insight for me was plain and simple—and obvious!—fact to her. Rather than being offended, I was mostly relieved by her response. I am nothing if not earnest, and while there is a place for that in the spiritual life there is a place for levity, too, and for not taking ourselves too seriously, even as we approach the work of reconciling with God, the earth, and one another with great seriousness. Realizing that my grand epiphany

was just one of a seemingly infinite number of surprises that the garden had in store for anyone with eyes to see was liberating. Maybe I did not have to work quite so hard at my soul searching. Maybe working in a garden could provide me with more moments of wonder, insight, and renewal than there were beads of sweat on my brow. Maybe it was enough to enter the garden with an eagerness to learn, and the humility to know that learning would mean making mistakes and letting my ignorance be revealed and forgiven. Maybe there is a kind of leadership in that, too, a leadership of vulnerability and authenticity. It is not such a bad thing to be the scribe who receives no deference, as Rasmussen might put it.

2. Expanding our community beyond our borders

In answer to the survey prompt asking for a comment about “the spiritual and/or practical impact of the garden on your congregation,” one of our garden volunteers wrote: “It has given us a concrete mission and focus that is OUTWARD, very healing after being ‘hunkered down’ for a few years.” As discussed previously, an innate spirit of generosity and a burgeoning practice of hospitality led Good Shepherd to share its land in the first place. Once that welcome was extended, we found that our connections to the wider community did grow, although sometimes in fits and starts and generally in unexpected ways.

Our hope at the beginning of the church garden project was that Shepherd Farm would be an endeavor that would be joined by people from outside of our congregation. At first these hopes were largely disappointed. Congregations and individuals expressed interest in participating in the garden, but they rarely followed through. People told us to talk to schools, other scouting troops, and similar organizations, and we did, but those

conversations rarely bore any fruit at all. We tried to reach out beyond our borders through the media (print and social media), word of mouth, and Diocesan communications, but in the first year our efforts often fell flat. There was much good will expressed, but very little regular, hands-on assistance from other congregations or from nearby schools and community groups.

One early act of encouragement came to us from within the community of our Diocese, in the form of an invitation to preach at the Cathedral on Flower Sunday, an enduring tradition among Episcopalians in the St. Louis region. As the Very Rev. Mike Kinman, Dean of Christ Church Cathedral, stated in his announcement, “Flower Sunday traces its roots back to 1890. Missouri Botanical Garden founder Henry Shaw, a member of the Cathedral, stipulated in his will that, after his death, an annual sermon be preached ‘on the wisdom and goodness of God as shown in the growth of flowers, fruits, and other products of the vegetable kingdom.’” An added level of significance came from the positioning the 2014 Flower Sunday within a series of events highlighting “prophetic voices” in St. Louis, to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the Rev. Martin Luther King’s visit to Christ Church Cathedral. This signaled that the Cathedral community and our Bishop saw the possibility that church gardening could be understood as part of a prophetic tradition. As exhilarating as it was to participate in this occasion, however, it did not result in any significant practical assistance or involvement in the garden. Once again we were left to hope that we had planted seeds that would bear fruit in the future.

It would be impossible to talk about community in the context of the St. Louis region and not discuss Ferguson and all that ensued after the death of Michael Brown in August of 2014. Ferguson is a little more than 20 miles away from Town and Country,

but more than geography separates us. Town and Country is almost exclusively white and extremely affluent; Ferguson is much more diverse racially and economically, with a large African-American population and both working- and middle-class residents. After the death of Michael Brown and the demonstrations that followed, some in our congregation wondered whether and how we might get involved in helping their community in some way.

This was by no means a simple conversation to have. Throughout the St. Louis region feelings were running very high and discussions quickly turned heated, if not downright confrontational. I did preach about Ferguson and Michael Brown that first Sunday after the shooting, but I also thought it important that we find practical ways to be involved. My congregational leadership did not like the idea of my getting involved in protests; I even had people ask me please not to go anywhere near Ferguson because they feared for my safety. As a kind of compromise between doing nothing and doing something that would divide our own community, Good Shepherd connected with the food pantry at St. Stephen's Episcopal Church in Ferguson. At first we offered to bring in a big harvest of fresh vegetables from the garden. However, like many food pantries, they did not have refrigerator space and were not sure they would be able to give away produce. My family went with me to deliver the canned goods to St. Stephens, and at the last minute we added one more box, this one filled with little baggies full of beautiful, plump cherry and pear tomatoes from the church garden. One of our Shepherd Farm gardeners had insisted; they don't need to be cooked, she said, they're already clean, and they're just as convenient as anything in a can.

It turns out she was right. When I delivered them I made sure to tell the rector, who was working at the pantry that day, that if they had any trouble giving the tomatoes away to their patrons it was fine with us if parishioners took them instead. We just wanted them to have something that was really from us, something that felt personal. He was incredibly gracious about it, even in the midst of such a stressful situation. Later we heard that our tomatoes were a big hit, and were all gone by mid-day. I reflected in a sermon later what a privilege it was to be able to help in a situation like that, even in such a small way. Perhaps the most important thing was that it gave me a reason to show up in person, and to try to offer some small form of encouragement to my brothers and sisters during a time of crisis. And by my going in person, it made the whole idea of “Ferguson” far less frightening to some of the people in my parish. Having produce and other food to drop off was almost an excuse for showing up, and then talking to my parish about it, and then slowly and carefully finding ways to talk about some of the issues that were now being invoked by the very word “Ferguson.” We are far from being done with those conversations, and I have no clear sense of assurance that I have done the right thing in terms of how I led the parish during this time. Looking back over a tumultuous and traumatic season in the life of our region and the larger community, I can find only a few bright spots amidst the violence and division, and one of those bright spots is my memory of those little red and yellow tomatoes—a tiny token, perhaps, but a real one.

Most of the connections we made with the larger community were less dramatic, of course. Some were completely unexpected, such as when a local herb society dropped off several flats of plants as a donation to our garden, or when a neighbor girl showed up asking to volunteer in the garden to fulfill her required community service hours. Perhaps

the two most meaningful, lasting connections we made were with the organizations that receive the bulk of our produce. One of the organizers of the St. John's Peace Meal and his wife became very active volunteers in the garden and helped a great deal with planning meals and transporting food from our parish to theirs, which was help we desperately needed in that first year, when our yield far exceeded our wildest expectations and we were unsure how to handle all of the bounty. More than that, there was a kind of mutual care and concern that evolved between those of us who worked in the garden and the people we fed. The patrons of the Peace Meal could not have known how much thought and worry had gone into deciding what to grow, let alone the work of actually growing it, a concern that stemmed from our desire to provide nutritionally dense foods that would not add to the problem of obesity among the impoverished residents of our city. We had chosen leafy greens, broccoli, and the like over potatoes, sweet potatoes, and corn. But even if they did not know of the discernment, the care, and the work that had gone into choosing and growing the vegetables we served, they expressed appreciation and even wonder. We hear comments all the time about how during the growing season the Peace Meal has "the best salads in the city" and "tomatoes that really taste like tomatoes." Such comments fill our volunteers with gratitude and give us the inspiration to go back out into the garden and keep working.

Even in the local, non-church community there have been reports about how inspirational our garden is, for instance from members of the groups that rent out our parish hall for their activities. As one survey respondent put it, "Whether on a conscious level or not, members of the community see us working to alleviate hunger and live out our Christian mission." This helps establish Good Shepherd as an entity within the larger

community. In order to be included, it is important to be known, to be recognized, to be identified and identifiable in some way. Our congregation often felt invisible before, or known only for the scandal that had rocked us; now we are becoming known.

I will conclude this section with anecdotes shared by two different parishioners about a sense of connection they forged with the people at Circle of Concern, the food pantry that receives at least two donations a week from us during harvest time. One parishioner explained the importance of an encounter she had when she went to drop off a donation of fresh-picked vegetables. A family who appeared to be immigrants from Mexico, all speaking Spanish together, were leaving the building as she arrived. The parishioner stopped them to ask if they wanted to take anything from our offering. They seemed not to speak much English, and the parishioner does not speak much Spanish, but they pointed to some peppers we had grown and asked, “Hot?” The parishioner said, “Yes! Hot! *Caliente!*” The faces of the family members broke into grins and they hauled away a bunch of jalapeños that day. The parishioner says she thinks of that interaction often and imagines that for that family receiving hot peppers was like getting comfort food or a taste of home. Another parishioner reported that when she arrived and said she had a donation from Shepherd Farm, the volunteers asked her where her farm was because “you always have the best vegetables and I want to come buy some for myself.” The parishioner explained that we are not a farm that sells food but a church garden that gives it away. They had a great conversation about church gardening, and what a novel concept it was that we were giving away the best of what we had to offer rather than just the surplus. I have to admit that my penchant for evangelism means I have had similar conversations with cashiers at the grocery store, my massage therapist, and total

strangers. But those conversations do not necessarily qualify as building community in the same way that conversations at Circle of Concern do, because the latter are part of an ongoing relationship of mutual benefit and care.

3. Deepening our community (relationships within the parish)

In *Making Peace with the Land*, Norman Wirzba writes: “Christian reconciliation is about bringing all bodies into a peaceful, life-promoting and convivial relationship with each other.”⁷⁸ One of the immediate benefits of the Good Shepherd Farm garden turned out to be the relationships that grew and were strengthened among members of the parish. The core team of gardeners got to know each other in a more organic way (no pun intended) than usually happens in parish life. There were people who chose to spend time in the garden individually, but most of us spent the majority of our working time in the garden together, in small groups, once or twice a week. Slowly stories unfolded, and hopes and disappointments were shared. One of the gardeners regularly brought her preschool-aged granddaughter, who did not come to church otherwise but who soon became everyone’s honorary grandchild. My husband became an integral part of the garden team, and that provided a more natural and realistic way for him to become known by parishioners, as opposed to just being viewed from a distance as “the rector’s husband,” a role with no precedent in our community. My younger daughter, too, spent hours in the garden, and developed a new pride in her physical stamina and ability to nurture and care for plants.

Many congregations look for ways to create intergenerational learning and fellowship, although too often the programs that result from these efforts have limited

⁷⁸ Wirzba, *Making Peace*, 24.

success. Working in a garden is something that people of different ages, levels of knowledge, and ability can do well together without much strain. When we raised our deer fence at the beginning of the season, we had both a nine-year old and an 80-year old lending a hand, and dogs underfoot as well. It had the feeling that I associate with barn raising or bee quilting circles—people working hard together toward a common goal that, in this case, they recognized as integral to God’s purpose in the life of the church. This is the inclusive, egalitarian spirit that Rasmussen says will mark a Christian community being shaped by discipleship. Furthermore, the conversations that take place in the garden are more full of laughter and wonder than any I have heard inside the walls of a church, with the possible exception of some small prayer groups that have developed a deep level of intimacy over an extended period of time.

Inclusivity is not always easy to attain. Gardening is physical work. Some of us who worked in the garden were in better physical shape than others. Some were stronger than others. We discovered that while gardening is hard work, there is almost always some task to be done by those who are less able. We needed people to weed, water, and harvest, but we also needed people to sort, count, and weigh what was harvested. One does not have to be very fit to collect herbs for pesto, so that became a task left for those who were feeling tired or weak. We encouraged people who felt they were not physically capable of gardening to join us from time to time to help in the record-keeping; while someone else weighed produce, they could write down what was being weighed and help us keep track of our harvest. We put out a general call to the congregation, especially those not otherwise involved in the garden, to help out by donating empty one-gallon plastic milk jugs, and helping us turn them into a drip irrigation system for our tomatoes.

More significantly, we worked on and received a grant that allowed us to create a more accessible walkway to the garden and to use straw bale gardening in part of the garden, which permits people with limited mobility to garden without having to get down to ground level. Through all these efforts, bodies of various abilities were honored and included in the work of the garden.

One of the most intentional ways we built community was through our Vacation Bible School. Using the “Abundant Life” materials produced by Episcopal Relief and Development as a foundation, our Christian Formation director created a two-week curriculum that was all based in our garden. Seventeen children participated, ranging in age from four to eleven, and coming to us from several other congregations besides our own. The leader group also included adults from other congregations, and ranged in age from two teenagers (both from Good Shepherd) on up to those of far more advanced years. The children learned about basic plant biology, started a worm farm, took nature walks, learned Bible stories and songs relating to creation and gardens, and so much more. They spent time in the garden every day, mostly weeding and watering, as well as learning to identify different plants. They made garden markers for us to help others in the identification process, too. Perhaps their favorite activity was when we discovered cabbage worms eating away at our broccoli and Brussels sprouts plant. Not knowing how else to rid the garden of them, and not wanting to use pesticides, we had the children go out and pick the big caterpillars off the plants by hand. While some were initially reluctant (they thought it all seemed a little “gross”), others jumped into the task with relish. After that, when given a choice of activities there were several children whose first choice was to be put on cabbage-worm patrol. This was far-and-away the most successful

Vacation Bible School we had ever held at our parish, and we are continuing garden-based learning with our youth throughout the year now.

Some of the ways that we tried to include even those in the congregation who never stepped foot in the garden deserve a brief mention. First and foremost, this is where preaching plays a role. For the connection between the garden and people's spiritual lives to take root and become intentional, rather than latent, there must be someone helping to articulate the contours and development of that connection. In most congregations, the sermon is the best place for that articulation to occur; other opportunities for communication and conversation, from the newsletter to the Sunday school classroom, are also vital but may tend to reach smaller segments of the congregation. The liturgy and the sermon, on the other hand, are where the majority of people will be shaped and formed the majority of the time. In other words, you have to reach people where they are: and where they are, generally (if they are in church at all), is in the pews on Sunday. So, if the desired spiritual benefits are to be transformative for the whole congregation, and not just for individuals (especially in congregations where actual gardeners are in the minority), preaching must take priority. A passage from Ellen Davis gets at this quite eloquently,

The tragic imagination reaches back into memory, in order to recall the beloved community to itself. Imagination is the means whereby writers with diverse gifts may enable their communities literally to 're-member,' to work toward their own wholeness [...] Surely Biblical scholars, theologians, teachers, and preachers have a special role to play in the work of cultural re-membering, because we live in close contact with the most powerful expressions of the tragic imagination ever to be captured in words.⁷⁹

⁷⁹ Davis, *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture*, 16.

Storytelling, teaching, and preaching are Christian practices that help shape a community, and regularly including anecdotes and information about the garden in these practices is a way to include the entire community in that process of formation.

We did also try to strengthen the connection between the garden and other parts of the liturgy, although I think this is a growing edge that deserves more attention. For example, we held our first ever Rogation Day liturgy on a Sunday morning at the conclusion of our regular weekly Eucharist. We processed from the church door to the garden, stopping to pray and bless various points along the way. The first year, however, it was pouring rain, so actual participation was limited—and the plan of sprinkling blessed water on our plants became a tad ridiculous. We also began bringing forward some of our produce during the Offertory some Sundays so that it can be blessed before being given away. In addition of course, we regularly report on the garden's progress to the congregation. At the end of the first season, when we were able to announce that we had harvested more than 2,000 pounds of food, there were audible gasps and spontaneous applause from the congregation. That felt like a turning point in the relationship between the parish and the garden, and in fact we did have 75 percent more volunteer participation our second year than our first.

4. Knowing Our Place in Relationship with the Land

Drawing on my earlier argument that for the practice of shaping community to be a fully Christian endeavor it must include the land and other aspects of creation in its understanding of community, I will use this section to show how we are beginning to see signs of this understanding at Good Shepherd. Thanks to our work creating and

maintaining the Shepherd Farm garden, we now focus less on our land as a commodity or even a resource and more on it as a gift and, ultimately, as a part of who we are.

I trace the origins of this shift in perspective to the very beginning of the garden, when the dates for our ground breaking and first planting kept being pushed back due to an unseasonably cold and snowy spring. For those of us who had made a commitment to work in the garden, this series of delays was somewhat frustrating and provoked at least a mild amount of anxiety, but it also reminded us about the Christian virtues of patience and humility. Over and over I found myself turning to the familiar words of the prophet: “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts” (Isaiah 55:10-11). This gentle command to humility in the face of things we cannot hope to fully understand, let alone control, took on new depth. While I do not believe that God sent the hard freezes of March to test us, I do believe that for our community to successfully get through such unexpected delays and disappointments gave us a sense of spiritual discipline and cohesion. It reminded us that all of our plans for our little garden in our corner of Missouri were just plans, and that we were going to have to wait to start putting them into action until something bigger than us happened, something we call spring. The waiting together and then working together once the weather finally began to cooperate reinforced in our group the trust that spring always does come, just not always according to our schedule; beyond even that it affirmed our fundamental faith that God’s hand is always at work in creation, shaping and sustaining us. We do not need to fully see or understand how that shaping and sustaining takes place in order to have faith in it, any more than we need to know the

exact date on which the ground will thaw in order to purchase seeds and plan to place them in the soil at the appropriate moment.

One more point needs to be made about the period of frustration and waiting that preceded planting: it was communal waiting, which made it quite different from the individual waiting that many of us endure from time to time in life. We were anxiously checking the ground and the forecasts together, knowing that we would need a group working together at the same time to get the initial plowing and planting done. Some of the later work of the garden could happen at a more individual pace, but those first early steps were really group work, and so required coordination and cooperation. The closest analogy I can think of in life outside of church is when a family is awaiting the birth of a baby. Although of course in that case the real labor is primarily completed by one person, the mother, there is still often a sense that the whole family is anticipating the same event, waiting for the same moment, so that each person can perform the necessary tasks. For the mother's spouse or partner that might be serving as birthing coach or support system, for a grandparent it could mean stepping in to care for younger siblings, while others in the family might have jobs like cleaning house, cooking meals, or running errands. It's not that everyone is going to be doing exactly the same work, but that the work has a shared purpose and meaning. That was the feeling that developed as we waited for the day we could begin the garden: that we were waiting together for something new to come to life.

“For as rain and snow fall from the heavens and return not again, but water the earth, bringing forth life and giving growth, seed for sowing and bread for eating, so is my word that goes forth from my mouth; it will not return to me empty; but it will

accomplish that which I have purposed, and prosper in that for which I sent it.”⁸⁰ These verses that I had recited over and over again during Morning Prayer were no longer abstractions; rain and snow, seed and harvest were no longer *just* metaphors. They continued to be metaphors, of course, but like all rich, sacramental language they were also *more than* merely metaphorical. Weather is a constant topic of conversation in the Midwest, and perhaps especially in Midwestern church circles, and yet the kind of communal waiting and watching we endured made a difference in *how* we talked about the weather; it was no longer a polite distraction that allowed us to avoid more meaningful topics. Rain and snow suddenly mattered in the life of our community, in more meaningful ways than when we considered rain on Sunday a nasty inconvenience or a heavy snowfall as a potential reason to cancel services. They mattered because they would affect the garden, and the garden mattered because it would feed people, but also because it had already become tied up with our identity as a parish and with our overall sense of community. We were Good Shepherd, the people who had started Shepherd Farm; we cared about whether the Brussels sprouts were hardy enough to survive a frost and whether there would be enough rain to keep our lettuces healthy.

This was more than a practical concern, and certainly more than a concern about how we would look if our garden failed. As Matthew Gowans writes, “The gardener views the garden as an end in itself in addition to any other instrumental role it plays in providing food, beauty, or ecological services. Furthermore, the gardener tends to recognize that his or her own meaning is somehow entangled with the *telos* of the

⁸⁰ Isaiah 55:10-11, found in The Book of Common Prayer, 87.

garden.”⁸¹ It would probably be overreach to say that we were quite that connected to the garden before we even started planting. But we were already moving in that direction. By extending our care and concern beyond the literal walls of the church to the little patch of land we were tending, we were allowing a connection between land and people to take shape and come into being as well. We were cultivating love and attention for the world outside our doors, and in so doing beginning to realize that we were not actually ever separate from that world at all.

These lessons of timing and patience did not end after the first seeds and seedlings were planted, of course. Waiting for signs of growth and vitality is its own discipline, one quite intimately connected to the shaping of community that is looking for those signs in itself, not just in the garden. As Mervyn Wilson writes,

The gardener soon recognises that gardens have seasons: spring, summer, autumn, winter. Plants, too, have their life cycles: germination, youthful vigour, maturity, decay. Apart from this general law, each being has its own time. In the germination of seeds, this is most noticeable. A cucurbita or a brassica will come right forward given the appropriate conditions of moisture and warmth. Many tree seeds can take years. But generally, not only in germination, but in speed of growth, in length of life, each has its own time. Gardens as a whole also have their time.⁸²

We had to learn, as a community, to be observers and servants of the garden’s time, and not to expect it to conform to our schedules. We tried to be flexible about finding work for people to do as their schedules allowed it, but the truth is that there simply is more work at certain times in a garden’s life cycle than at others, and it can be hard to predict exactly when the garden’s needs will make themselves known. Between planting and first

⁸¹ Matthew Gowans, “Cultivating Soil, Life, and Ethical Awareness,” *Currents in Theology and Mission* 39, no. 2 (Apr 2012), 117-118.

⁸² Mervyn Wilson, “The vicar and the vicar’s garden,” *Rural Theology* 5, no. 2 (2007), 107.

harvest there is of course watering and weeding, as well as a lot of watching and praying, that goes on. But once the harvest gets started in earnest, the amount of time required to keep up with the garden's demands can double or triple in the course of a few days. This meant, for instance, that when our pear tomato plants practically exploded with fruit during a week when a few members of our team were on vacation, others had to take up the slack. It is not really an option to choose to put off collecting the fruit or vegetable when it is ready; depending on the crop, you may have a grace period of a few days, but you might also return to find that good produce has rotted on the vine, or been eaten by birds or bugs, or fallen to the ground and become inedible. This required more than a "team effort." This required a spirit of community and cooperation that went far beyond anything I had experienced in church before. We genuinely relied on one another every bit as much as the garden relied on us. Communal waiting, and having to coordinate our schedules, was in fact the practice of shaping our community in action, and it all revolved around our faithfulness to the land and to the integrity of creation.

Conclusion: Connection, Caring, and Brussels Sprouts

I will conclude this chapter with a brief illustration of how much my own sense of being part of a land community developed during the course of my first season in the garden. One of the many things I did not understand before getting involved with the Shepherd Farm garden: gardens are beautiful, and a little addictive. It doesn't take too many hours or days of working in a garden before you really *care* about it. Caring about it causes you to pay closer attention, and paying closer attention makes it even more beautiful. One day in the garden I went to inspect a row of plants that was just beginning to sprout and take discernible shape. It was not a row I had planted myself, and we did

not yet have plant markers identifying the various crops. Then I looked again at some tiny buds starting to form on a slender stalk, and it hit me: these were Brussels sprouts. I had never seen an immature Brussels sprout plant before. I really only knew what a Brussels sprout looked like once it had been harvested and put in a plastic bag for me to grab off the grocery store shelf. But there was something about the particular curve of these tiny leaves that rang a bell of recognition and suddenly I felt like I was in love. It was like running into an old friend and seeing her child for the first time, and recognizing the curve of your friend's cheek or the distinct shape of her nose echoed in the child's face. This itty-bitty plant that looked like little more than a weed was going to grow up to be one of my favorite vegetables. It filled me with a disproportionate joy.

To someone who has not experienced the ecstasy of a garden, it will sound absurd, but I believe it is a moment similar to that famous vision described by Thomas Merton: "I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all these people, that they were mine, and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. It was like waking from a dream of separateness."⁸³ Of course Merton's vision gave him a new understanding of other people; mine involved a way of seeing the plants in our garden as being connected to me, to other plants, and to everyone else in a great web of creation. I believe that what happened to me in the garden profoundly transformed my ability to shape and lead my community, because it changed the way I saw the community.

Such a revelation is deeply connected to the insights Ellen Davis provides about what it means to "keep" or "consider" a garden and therefore all to keep all of creation: I

⁸³ Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, reprinted in *Thomas Merton, Spiritual Master: The Essential Writings* (NY: Paulist Press, 1992), 146.

was “considering” the garden in a new way, observing it with special care and attention, and learning from it about its nature and limitations, as well as my own. There are indications in the survey and in conversations I have had with parishioners that this kind of consideration, this special kind of seeing, is becoming woven into our community life. As one parishioner wrote, “For those involved in the garden, I believe there is a great appreciation of God’s everyday miracles [...] The beauty (and role) of a single plant, drop of water and yes—even cabbage worms—and how each of these is part of something bigger. For all (or at least most) of the church members, the garden is a source of amazement.” The care and tending of the garden is shaping us into a community of people who know how to care and tend for one another and for the earth.

Perhaps in the long run for our congregation, or at least for the gardeners among us, this will lead to an even greater awareness of our responsibility to the earth and to issues of sustainability, even beyond the decisions we make in and for the garden itself. Theology’s most prophetic voices are urging Christians to lead in an area where we have too often lagged behind. Sallie McFague, one of those voices, calls for an “Ecological Reformation” based on insights gathered from the sciences in recent years, which she labels “an ecological mode of human life” and even a new creation story. She writes,

This story also provides us with a new model of human life, one that is based on the best science of our day—in other words, on reality as presently understood. In this story, human beings are not individuals with the power to use nature in whatever ways we wish. Rather, we are *dependent* on nature and *responsible* for it. [...] The ecological model of human life tells us not only who we are but also what we must do; it gives us guidelines on how we should act. In other words, it is a functional creation story, one that has practical implications for how we live at personal and public levels.⁸⁴

⁸⁴ McFague, “A Manifesto to North American Middle-Class Christians,” in *Moral Ground*, 246-247.

The “ecological model” is both a new creation story and, if Ellen Davis is right, a very old one; the recognition of the dual realities of dependence and responsibility it espouses comes to life beautifully in a garden. Here too I see a growing edge for our congregation, a gap between beliefs and practices. Our survey results suggest that our practices in the garden are actually more progressive than our beliefs: only a handful of respondents reported a change in their understanding of the environment resulting from our gardening activities and many of those who commented on it wrote in rather prosaic terms, whereas they were often enthusiastic and even poetic in talking about other issues. Of course the overall numbers involved are too small to be definitive but, assuming for a moment it is true, then it will be interesting to see if our beliefs as a community ever catch up with our practices of community building and care for the earth. Personally, I believe that it is time for us all to awake from our dream of separateness. Maybe the seemingly irrational surge of love I felt for those baby Brussels sprouts was not disproportionate or sentimental at all. Maybe it was revolutionary.

Conclusion

The literature of the Christian agrarian movement, which has strongly influenced this project, suggests that there might be something in particular about gardening that makes it especially suitable for the work of formation and transformation I have traced in the chapters above. As Norman Wirzba writes, “Gardening is never simply about gardens. It is work that reveals the character of humanity, and is a demonstration of who we take ourselves and creation to be. It is the most direct and practical site where we can learn the art and discipline of being creatures.”⁸⁵ To a greater extent than I could have anticipated before the Shepherd Farm garden began, our time together in the garden has indeed revealed much about the character of our congregation and especially the people who work in the garden. It has been for us a place of learning, discipline, inspiration, community, prayer, and so much more. It has added depth and richness to our pursuit of what the great Anglican tradition calls holiness of life. As I said in the introduction, gardening has become a central practice in our faith, forming and defining our community in positive and life-giving ways.

As the conclusions to the last two chapters have illustrated, this is an ongoing project. The garden has taught us much, but if the gaps between beliefs and practices we are beginning to notice are any indication, it will always have more to teach and we will always have more to learn. As Mervyn Wilson writes,

The garden seems to provide an assurance as well as a warning. The assurance is that there is a reality and a blessing that can be conveyed through worldly structures and has the quality of something universal. The warning is that these structures must live and breathe. The spirit of their

⁸⁵ Wirzba, *Faith and Food*, 49.

growth and their capacity to pass on a blessing is not of human invention, nor is it simple⁸⁶

Participating in the genuinely organic growth of a garden led to a lot of soul-searching about how the structures of our church must “live and breathe” if they are to survive and even thrive. If a church were more like a garden, perhaps we could do a better job of incorporating new people and new ideas without fear of relinquishing our foundational identity and purpose. A vegetable garden does not stop being a vegetable garden because you plant some flowers in it; in fact the flowers can sometimes have a beneficial effect on the vegetables. To be fully alive is to be adaptive, not rigid. Some people find the need for adaptability exasperating or even terrifying. Many of us find ourselves attracted to church, especially to liturgical churches, because we believe that church is unchanging. Too often then we join the deadly chorus proclaiming that “we can’t do that because it’s never been done before” or “we must do it that way because that is how it’s always been done.” A garden militates against that kind of thinking. Consider the vitality and elasticity of a bean plant. It can be planted against a fence with a bunch of other bean plants or on a pole in the middle of a plot filled with some other vegetable entirely. It can be trained to grow in a certain direction, or pruned to limit its size. Its placement and scope are flexible because it is alive. Gardeners have an opportunity to learn a similar flexibility.

Not that “anything goes” in a garden. Plants have rules by which they grow and thrive; gardens have an organic sense of order that goes above and beyond how we plan or plot them out. You cannot plant a tomato seed in September and hope to have a ripe, red, juicy fruit in hand at Christmastime—or at least you can’t do such a silly thing in the

⁸⁶ Wilson, “The Vicar and the Vicar’s Garden,” 108.

Midwest. But the orderliness of a garden is, as I said, organic and alive, not rigid and imposed from the outside. The rules of the garden are part and parcel of the nature of the plants that grow in that garden, and how they interact with one another and their environment. Ultimately, the rules of the garden always tend toward growth and fecundity, even as they do not permit us to avoid the realities of death and failure. Our churches' rules tend too often in the other direction.

These are the kinds of ideas and concerns that regularly arise from the garden but that still need to be brought, full circle, back to the congregation for investigation and integration. Looking forward, this would seem to be one of the tasks of the church gardening that will be as consistently necessary as weeding, watering and harvesting: the intentional work of keeping the garden central to the congregation, even those who do not garden. The garden may continue regardless, but if it ever becomes peripheral to the community of our congregation it will cease to be life-giving to us in the same way that we hope to be responsible and loving toward it.

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Appendix One

An Interview

The following is an account of an interview I held with a parishioner whom I will call Tracey. Tracey and her husband Robert (not their real names) did most of the initial planning and implementing of the garden, and through the first two seasons of Shepherd Farm they gave more hours of hard work than most of the rest of us combined. The interview was only with Tracey because, near the end of the first growing season, her husband Robert had a stroke and lost most of his ability to speak. The stroke and its aftermath relate to their work in the garden, as will become clear. Her insights draws together the primary themes that have been explored in this essay—discernment, hospitality, and community—in vivid and personal ways. This interview was held too late for me to weave it into the body of my thesis, but it seemed too important to leave it out altogether. I took notes during the interview and have tried to relate her words as accurately as possible.

At the start of the interview Tracey surprised me by saying that when they began the garden she felt completely incompetent to the task: “It was a feeling of utter helplessness. The first year I was afraid every day. Afraid, or else angry, feeling that I wasn’t enough. It was a very public way to be afraid. The first year was facing the risk of failure and the fear. I was so limited. I had to face my limitations all the time.” I asked her what changed the second year, if it got easier because of the great success of our harvest. She was emphatic that “the shift,” as she called it, “was not because of the success of the garden but because of my sense of acceptance. The shift out of fear was

because God showed me over and over and over and over that ‘you are not in control.’ He took my love of watching things grow and my knowledge and made this happen. My job was just to put my hands in the dirt, harvest what was ready and get it in the hands of those who need it.”

In between the first and second year was Robert’s stroke, and Tracey recounted that the lessons she had learned in the garden helped her deal with that devastating situation. Even though his prognosis was that he would never talk again, never read, perhaps not even understand spoken language, she said firmly, “I had no fear. I had been walking the uncertainty and facing the bounty of good. Without all that [had happened] in the garden I don’t know if I could ever have managed. How will I tell an aphasic that I am here and you are loved? I would be his voice.” She affirmed also that other parishioners, many of whom she got to know better through their work in the garden, were a source of support and encouragement: “Someone always said the words I needed to hear.”

She concluded: “The second year was a journey of discovering other people: what did they come to the garden for and what brought them delight. It was different every day. For some it was to talk, for some to smell, or to breathe, or to look—and for some it was to focus on a weed!”

Other interviews, conducted earlier, have received mention in the body of the thesis.

Appendix Two

Survey Results

After receiving permission from the Institutional Review Board, I distributed surveys and release forms to all parishioners who indicated an interest in completing them. As of February 28, 2016 I have received surveys from 18 parishioners, all of whom signed release forms. I did follow-up interviews with four parishioners. The youngest parishioner to complete a survey, with her father's help and permission, was ten. The oldest parishioner to complete one is 81. Both have worked in the garden. Four of the people who completed the survey did not work in the garden at all, one reported working only one or two hours total, and most of the respondents worked most than 20 hours each season. More results of the survey are included below.

Good Shepherd Episcopal Church Garden Questionnaire

(1) Did you participate in the Shepherd Farm garden during the first season (March 2014-November 2014)?

- (a) Yes: 14 people
- (b) No: 4 people
- (c) I don't recall: 0

(2) If yes, approximately how many hours TOTAL would you say you worked in 2014?

- (a) 1-2 hours: 1 person
- (b) 2-10 hrs: 2 people
- (c) 10-20 hrs: 4 people

(d) more than 20 hours (please specify, to the best of your ability, the number of hours): 7 people, with answers ranging from 30 to 1800 hours

(3) If you did not participate in the garden in 2014, can you say why?

(a) I didn't have time: 2 people

(b) I don't know how to garden

(c) I thought the garden was a bad idea

(d) I had physical limitations that kept me from participating: 2 people

(e) other

N/A: 14 people (because they did participate in the garden in 2014)

Comments:

"I loved the reason for the garden. I couldn't work in summer as my husband's accident kept me away."

(4) Did you participate in the Shepherd Farm garden during the second season (February 2015-December 2015)?

(a) Yes: 13 people

(b) No: 5 people

(c) I don't recall: 0 people

(5) If yes, approximately how many hours TOTAL would you say you worked in 2015?

(a) 1-2 hrs: 1 person

(b) 2-10 hrs: 1 person

(c) 10-20 hrs: 1 person

(d) more than 20 hours (please specify, to the best of your ability, the number of hours): 10 people

N/A: 5 people (because they did not participate in the garden in 2015)

(6) If you did not participate in the garden in 2015, can you say why?

- (a) I didn't have time: 2 people
- (b) I don't know how to garden: 0 people
- (c) I thought the garden was a bad idea: 0 people
- (d) I had physical limitations that kept me from participating: 3 people
- (e) other: 0 people

N/A: 13 people (because they did participate in the garden in 2015)

Comments (optional): None

(7) Thinking about the spiritual impact of the Shepherd Farm garden on your congregation, would you say it has been:

- (a) very positive: 12 people
- (b) mostly positive: 5 people
- (c) somewhat positive: 1 person
- (d) neutral: 0
- (e) somewhat negative: 0
- (f) mostly negative: 0
- (g) very negative: 0
- (h) I don't know: 0

(8) Thinking about the practical impact of the Shepherd Farm garden on your congregation, would you say it has been:

- (a) very positive: 9 people
- (b) mostly positive: 8 people
- (c) somewhat positive: 1 person
- (d) neutral: 0

(e) somewhat negative: 0

(f) mostly negative: 0

(g) very negative: 0

(h) I don't know: 0

Comments on the spiritual and/or practical impact of the garden on your congregation (optional):

“Spiritually: during a time of civil and social unrest—we continued to use our efforts to bridge one socio-economic gap. A real manifestation of using God’s different talents. To accept that ‘we’ are not in control. Physically: to see that ‘church’ again is more than a building or a fund of money; to turn our eyes to God’s bounty and the ‘lack’ so ignored by media/political bodies.”

“There is a kind of constant appeal for workers that can be somewhat draining.”

“It sends a powerful message that thinking outside the box and some effort can make an enormous difference to the community.”

“I wish we had more volunteers.”

“For those involved in the garden, I believe there is a great appreciation of God’s everyday miracles—the beauty (and role) of a simple plant, drop of water, and yes—cabbage worms—and how each of these is part of something bigger. For all (or at least most) of the church members—the garden is a source of amazement. Amazed at the transformation of ‘idle’ land to a garden that produces a ton of produce in its first two years.”

“It has given us a concrete mission and focus that is outward, very healing after being ‘hunkered down’ for a few years.”

“Some people didn’t think the garden was going to be much and they were very surprised when it did so well. These people were amazed at its success. Don’t tell me the Holy Spirit wasn’t behind this success!”

(9) Thinking about the spiritual impact of the Shepherd Farm garden on the larger community, would you say it has been:

(a) very positive: 9 people

(b) mostly positive: 5 people

(c) somewhat positive: 3 people

- (d) neutral: 0
- (e) somewhat negative: 0
- (f) mostly negative: 0
- (g) very negative: 0
- (h) I don't know: 0

(10) Thinking about the practical impact of the Shepherd Farm garden on the larger community, would you say it has been:

- (a) very positive: 12 people
- (b) mostly positive: 4 people
- (c) somewhat positive: 2 people
- (d) neutral: 0
- (e) somewhat negative: 0
- (f) mostly negative: 0
- (g) very negative: 0
- (h) I don't know: 0

Comments on the spiritual and/or practical impact of the garden on the community (optional):

“During the Peace Meal many stated that the best salad was at the meal.”

“There have been several people who have heard about Shepherd farm and come by to help or to learn more in order to start a garden at their church. I can think of several occasions where an individual who visited was offered to opportunity to pray with us or was asked permission for us to pray for them.”

“Positive feedback of Peace Meal participants to eating FRESH vegetables.”

“Whether on a conscious level or not, members of the community see us working to alleviate hunger and live out our Christian mission.”

How would you describe the primary purpose of the garden?

(a) to feed the hungry

Comment: “First and foremost, our efforts every day on that which someone will eat.”

(b) to be good stewards of our land:

Comment: “Giving back to God’s work on earth that which we now possess.”

(c) to help people learn about Good Shepherd and create a positive image: 0

Comment: “In surprising ways—the ‘middle men’—the staff and volunteers at St. John’s, Circle of Concern, and Trinity seem to see us as a church set apart from other churches.”

(d) all of the above: 18 people

(e) none of the above or other (if other, please explain): 0

For further reflection; you may answer any or all of these questions, even if you have not worked in the garden.

Do you ever pray for the garden? Yes: 11 No: 4

“Only on formal occasions at church—Rogation Sunday, VBS, etc”

“Nearly every day.”

“Yes, especially for fair and clement weather.”

“I pray more so for the people who work in the garden than for the garden itself.”

“I come and pray in the garden.”

“Yes. For the garden, the workers, and those who get the food—the consumers.”

“Yes, and often in the garden.”

“I prayed for the garden sometimes but also I used the garden as a place to pray in general.”

Has the garden changed the way you think about the environment? Yes: 7 No: 7

“Yes. I think more holistically about God’s creation—how all things are intertwined and dependent on each other.”

“Resourcing a comparatively small plot of turf, yielding a ton of consumable food raised organically is very thought-provoking.”

“Not changed it, but serves as a reminder to be more conscious of the environment, especially our impact.”

“I have always been aware of the environment.”

“Yes—there are not that many home gardens around her and I think gardening is almost a lost art.”

“A bit—mostly with water usage. (Rain barrels; reservoir; milk jugs; straw bales = importance of using water wisely.)”

Has the garden changed the way you think about God as creator or humanity’s responsibility to creation? Yes: 9 No: 5

“Yes. I am much more cognizant of being a good steward of the earth’s bounty; conserving resources, composting, reducing waste.”

“Yes. God is more in control than I realized.”

“The astounding success of the garden from the outset is an example of God’s will manifest.”

“Yes it makes me know that he is powerful.”

“This has been my way of thinking all my life.”

“Just more aware and appreciative of God the creator.”

“It’s made me think about God providing sun and rain, and monitoring the weather.”

“Not really although it made me much more aware of my responsibility to help.”

Has the garden changed the way you think about food? Yes: 11 No: 3

“Yes. I am experimenting more with cooking and eating a wide variety of vegetables. I look for healthier options and ways to prepare food.”

“It has changed my understanding of how everyone expects organically grown food to be perfect and the amount tossed away due to a blemish or a bug bite.”

“It makes me more conscious of the value of locally grown organic food.”

“Maybe I have tried more foods.”

“Definitely increased my desire to eat more locally/organically.”

“Yes! I’ve tried new vegetables that I never would have otherwise.”

“No this is the way I eat.”

“A bit, probably not as much as most. (Growing up in Iowa and working in the agricultural industry—I had a pretty good idea on how food is grown.)”

“Yes, now I know how turnips grow.”

“No, I’ve always been a fan of all vegs, but I was made aware of the importance of sharing food with the poor.”

Has the garden changed the way you grow, buy, or prepare food? Yes: 12 No: 2

“Yes. It has prompted me to put in a small vegetable/herb garden in my back yard.”

“Yes. We eat more greens daily with more variety.”

“I try to buy from local sources and use organic food when there is a choice.”

“Yes we try to buy more fruits and veggies.”

“We try to buy more fresh vegetables and fruit.”

“No this is the way I live.”

“We eat more dark greens.”

“Our family has for the last few years kept a small garden. Now we implement more techniques from Good Shepherd’s farm.”

“Yes! When I’m at the supermarket, I wonder ‘Where did this produce come from? How old is it? Was it grown and harvested by people who cared about and loved it?’”

“Yes! Thanks to T, I’ve learned lots of tricks on preparing new vegetable dishes and have experimented with making a few of my own!”

“I have certainly started to prepare more greens and other veggies we grew in the garden.”

Have you made or deepened any relationships (with members of the congregation or with others) because of the garden? Yes: 11 No: 4

“I have gotten to know “the garden crew” better and have gained knowledge and respect for the different skills/gifts each brings to the garden.”

“Definitely, people talk over the vine in ways they would never talk in coffee hour.”

“Yes I made more friends.”

“Absolutely.”

“Yes! I’ve been so impressed with the people outside of Good Shepherd who are drawn somehow to the garden—I love to hear their stories. I also have so much respect and appreciation for the parishioners who do so much more than me.”

“Absolutely. Most notably with T & R, but with all who are interested in the garden.”

Has the garden changed anything about your relationship to Good Shepherd? Yes: 12 No: 2

“I think we have examined what God has given us, and although we are a small parish, we have used what we have creatively to address a community need and make an impact far beyond our numbers.”

“Strengthened bonds with other parishioners via ‘small groups’ and realization by leadership that we had an untapped resource (land) that could be used for the greater good.”

“It has made me aware of the untapped potential with our community that, when provided with an outlet, blooms into an expression of God’s will known.”

“Yes it makes it feel more like family.”

“Glad we are using the land.”

“Yes I am glad we took this journey and are using our land in such a way.”

“I have always felt that I had a good relationship with my Good Shepherd family and my work in the garden simply deepened it.”

“Yes, it helped me to get to know some of our members better.”

“I am really proud of those that participate and the good we are accomplishing in the community.”

“Deepened my trust in God and the fellow Christians in our congregation.”