

“Cultivating the Garden

II Corinthians 8:7-15; Mark 4:2-9, 14-20 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn
Vista La Mesa Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), La Mesa, California – June 30, 2024

Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that our hearts might be open to receive your word and bear good fruit. In Jesus’ name, we pray, Amen.

What is your ‘present abundance’? Does your life feel abundant right now? If a visiting preacher came in here and told us that we “excel in everything,” how would you react? We have been struggling to keep our energy up, getting creative in our efforts to keep things together with the small number of folks we have to do what needs to be done. We might well wonder if we excel in anything, let alone everything. So if Paul walked in here and tried to appeal to our “present abundance,” we might be tempted to reply “flattery will get you nowhere.” But what if he’s right? Or what if we just decided to see how things could look, if we take on Paul’s perspective for a moment and assumed that we are, in fact, sitting here with a ‘present abundance’?

Paul, of course, wasn’t actually writing to us. He was writing to the church in Corinth, and not for the first time. The Second Letter to the Corinthians is actually considered by scholars to contain fragments of multiple letters, mostly because it doesn’t hang together as a whole all that well. The portion we’re looking at today is part of a what was essentially a fundraising letter. Paul was running a fundraising campaign for “the poor” in Jerusalem. Paul had a somewhat complicated relationship with the early church leaders in Jerusalem, and this collection was part of his plan to show them the

sincerity of his faith and the benevolence of his intentions with regard to his missions among the Gentiles. It's not clear if "the poor" for whom he was collecting was a euphemism for the first Christians in Jerusalem, or if it really meant people in need, with Jerusalem as a central collecting point for the funds raised to assist them. Regardless, Paul was diligently working to convince the various predominantly Gentile churches he had founded and ministered to that they should "contribute to the needs of the saints."

So he reminded those Corinthians of their "present abundance," and told them how he loved them and how well they were doing. Do you suppose they agreed with that assessment? There is another verse in this passage that struck me. Verse 10 lands with a poignant relevance for us today, as we gather to celebrate our lay leaders, remembering how big a day this was a year ago, with the Deweys here to preach for us and anniversary festivity in the air. Paul writes: "it is appropriate for you who began last year not only to do something but even to desire to do something—now finish doing it, so that your eagerness may be matched by completing it according to your means."

We did, indeed, begin to do something, and even to desire to do something. And we are doing the thing and continuing to do the thing, even as we continue to discern what the thing is, and even as we acknowledge that we may not know what "completing" the thing would look like. There are some very comforting phrases in here. Paul promises that what he is asking is that we complete the thing "according to your means... according to what one has—not according to what one does not have." When everything feels a little thin, it may not seem like working with what we have will

get us very far. But what if we chose to believe Paul for a moment, and tried to identify our ‘present abundance’? What if we decided to believe that we have a ‘present abundance’? What if we looked around to find where we are yielding thirty, sixty, and a hundredfold?

I do think that if we turn to the parable of the sower Jesus shared with his disciples, we will be able to see our ‘present abundance’ better. Before we get too far in, I want to acknowledge that there are some human truths that are often glossed over in parables. So often, the characters in a parable are presented as individual, separate people. This one is good, this one tried to be good but failed, that one is definitely bad, and so on. But what we know to be true, if we are honest about the ongoing state of our own hearts is that some days we’re good soil, and some days we’re rocky soil, and some days we’re getting eaten up by the birds. The other thing about this parable that doesn’t quite fit right is how fatalistic it feels. It offers us the temptation to just say, well, I guess I fell in among the thorns, so why should I even try to change? But we’re not seeds, unable to do anything about where we landed, unable to protect ourselves from birds or try again to grow our roots a little deeper.

So if we’re looking for our abundance, let us first name that our agency – or our “desire to do something” as Paul might describe it – our eager desire to bear fruit is a gift. If we want to bear fruit, let us give thanks that we can do something about it. We can tend the soil of our hearts. We can cultivate the garden that is this church, making it a fertile place where spiritual maturity and well-grounded souls can grow.

Just as we watched Tim Cliffe dig the rocks out of that front bed for months last year, ultimately arranging them in a lovely border around the edges, we can remove the rocks from the soil of our souls that prevent us from digging deeper down to where the Living Water is found. It does take diligence, but thankfully, not as much brute strength and sweat as what Tim did out front! Cultivating a faith that endures through hard times is one of the central purposes of gathering as church. We're not just social media friends, posting GIFs of dancing unicorns or fireworks when somebody gets a win. We're here for one another when walking gets hard, when jobs are lost, when grandchildren succumb to cancer. We're not expected to be able to dig our roots deep all by ourselves; we do it together. We push those rocks out of one another's way, so that we can all access the Living Water.

We have witnessed John Lehton's ongoing battle with the weeds. I call it that because he's actually told me that's how he thinks about it as he's doing it, clearing section by section. But what would it look like for us to remove the weeds and thorns from one another's lives, the cares and temptations that pull us away from cultivating the flower of the Word that is planted within us? This may be trickier, because what looks like a weed to us may, in fact, be a different form of the sacred for someone else. "You will know them by their fruits, Jesus said. So sometimes we need to let things grow and see what emerges, even if, in the meantime, it looks to us like someone is wasting their time and not pitching in like we think they should. The work that is ongoing, that holds the church together is important. But the work that is only just now germinating, as

other folks listen for the rustlings of the Holy Spirit and dare to start something new that will connect their personal passions to our shared life of faith – that is the work that can lead us in new and fruitful directions.

We are not seeds; we are people. We have the capacity to cultivate this garden together in ways that make it more likely that our efforts to sow the Word will take root and bear fruit. And what's more, we are called to do this, not only for ourselves, not only for one another, but for those who aren't here yet. 'That is our 'present abundance,' the offering we have to give, for the sake of Christ and for the sake of those who need a new kind of abundance in their lives. There are so many people out there who have no idea that church can be a place of love and acceptance and welcome and joy. Seriously, they don't know. All they've seen is church that demands they squish themselves into a tight-fitting box that may or may not be the right shape for them. All they've heard is church people denouncing the things that bring them joy, the passions that have given them life. All they've experienced is church focused on "Thou shalt not," instead of "love one another." They're out there in the weeds, withering and drying up on the path, vulnerable to the vultures of hatred and judgment. We are cultivating a garden here. We need to find ways to open the gates of our garden fence and post charming signs there saying "Enter Here" and "All Are Welcome" and "Come On In" and "Please Enjoy!"

We have begun. We will continue. Completion is in God's hands. May we cultivate this garden, aware of our present abundance, so that all may flourish! H & A.