



# First United Church of Oak Park

## **Lessons From the Garden**

John 15: 1-8

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I've been doing a lot of gardening in the past year. And when I say "a lot of gardening," that's grading on a curve. Any amount of gardening at all is a huge increase for me. Suffice it to say, I'm no master gardener, but I have been enjoying doing my level best to keep the back yard garden healthy and happy.

In my (admittedly nascent) gardening, I've learned some important lessons. The biggest one is that gardening is not about planting plants in the ground, or hardly not at all. In fact, almost all gardening is about pulling plants up out of the ground. With trowel and shovel and fingers, gardening is about pulling plants up by the roots and tossing them on the compost heap. Weeding is a very polite name for the process of trying to pull up as many plants as possible as fast as possible. Lesser celandine and creeping Charlie, burdock root and bloody dock, dandelions by the dozen: They all get plucked up. Even poor unfortunate violet, which is a lovely flower, but just isn't what we want in our garden. Things must be pulled up and put to the side in the compost heap so that what we really want to see grow can grow. We do want our zebra grass to grow, so we have to give it what it needs: soil and sun and water and room to grow. What we want to see grow must be tended to.

Even among the plants that I want, I often wind up pulling up some of those, too. Last year, we planted tomato plants. Just a couple lovely little plants that were supposed to grow lots of tasty grape tomatoes about the size of a quarter. We planted two of them neatly side by side in a sunny corner of the garden with stakes to help them stay up off the ground, and waited eagerly for our tomatoes. One of them kind of struggled and was always looking sort of wilted. And by midsummer there were just a few scrawny globes to show for itself in terms of fruitfulness. Its neighbor, by contrast, was growing by leaps and bounds. It grew so tall I had to take some of the stakes from the little guy to help support its branches. They were loaded down with tomatoes, and I had to pick them regularly just to keep the plant from falling over from the weight of its fruit. Wind,

rain, dry stretches, it didn't matter — it just kept thriving. Eventually, there was nothing for it: I dug up the tomato plant that wasn't producing good fruit and gave the fruitful tomato plant full run of that sunny corner of the garden. Because of plantish green mechanisms beyond my understanding, when something is growing well, it grows more and more and more, seemingly able to withstand anything.

My two paltry learnings from a season of gardening: One: if you want to grow something in a garden, you have to give it what it needs to grow; it must be tended to. And two: those things that are fruitful will abound with more and more and more.

Not deep insights into the garden, I admit. But I learned enough, though, to make my ears perk up when I read this parable from Jesus about God being like the gardener of a vineyard. This parable is a gardening metaphor, and the basics of gardening are the same today as they have always been. This all makes a lot more sense to me now when I read about God going through the vineyard and pulling things out to make room for what God is trying to grow. It makes a lot more sense now when I read about God cutting back branches that are not growing any fruit to allow those fruitful branches to grow more and more and more. This is a very practical parable — as really they all are — it's just the reality of growing a garden.

Jesus is telling this parable to his disciples during the Last Supper. With the bread and cup still before them, the taste of dinner still on their lips, Jesus is teaching them about what they need to know to be his followers even after he is gone. Jesus is teaching them about how to be the church. These are lessons about how to be church, how to be faithful, how to be fruitful, how to be the sort of thing that God is trying to grow in the world. And in teaching the disciples how to be the church, Jesus uses lessons from the garden.

And the lessons of the garden — whether they are a great vineyard or my two little tomato plants — are still the same. The lessons for the church are still the same. We have to decide what it is that is really important to us, and make room for that to grow, give them what they need to grow. That means plucking up and leaving aside those things that are not important to us. They may be good and worthy things, but not what we are looking for — like the poor unfortunate violets I pull up out of garden because violets aren't what I'm trying to grow. We must choose those things for our church to do that are really important, that represent not just what we want to do, but what we can best discern is what God is calling

us to do. And we have to devote our resources to doing those things and leaving other things behind. The soil and sun and water of church is our people, our time, our money, our voice in the world; the ministries of the church that we want to see grow must be tended to.

And if that sounds daunting, remember the other part of the metaphor, too. It is a truth of the garden as it is a truth of churches. What is fruitful, what is producing good fruit will grow more and more and more. A church that is fruitful, that is doing good ministry, will grow more and more and more, seemingly able to withstand anything. When our youth programs have twenty teenagers doing scavenger hunts on the lawn, helping the young people of Oak Park keep their spirits up in challenging times — that is good fruit growing on the vines of this church. When people flood one another's mailboxes with cards of concern when a member of the church falls ill — that is good fruit growing on the vines of this church. When we worship God in beauty and joy and faithfulness even despite unprecedented challenges — that is good fruit growing on the vines of this church. When hundreds of families have good food to eat, picking up that food from our parking lot and our partner Beyond Hunger — that is good fruit growing on the vines of this church.

A total reinvention of our worship life on no notice, crises of civil governance, a deadly pandemic, the foundations of democracy under threat. Because of plantish green mechanisms beyond my understanding, when a church is doing good ministry, it grows more and more and more, seemingly able to withstand anything.

This is the final week of our stewardship worship theme — which is “growing our generosity.” And I could find no better framework for explaining the importance of generosity than Jesus' own words here in the gospel. All of the good, fruitful work that our church is able to do, that we are able to do together, all of that is possible because of the generosity of our members. Your generosity is why we are able to be fruitful. And just like a great and growing vineyard with hundreds and hundreds of branches intertwined together, it is because of what all of us together can give, that this place is able to grow into the place where God is calling us to be.

Because I believe God is calling us towards growth in our ministries, greater fruitfulness in those things that really make this place what it is — an honest and searching love of God rooted in worship, a passion for living out the good news that God is making of the world a just and peaceable realm, raising children and

youth up to be thoughtful and moral people, caring for one another, serving our neighbors in tangible ways. If we are generous — together — and devote our resources to those things that really matter, if we tend to the garden that is our church, we shall bear fruit more and more and more, and like a hearty tomato plant in a cheery sunny spot of the garden, we'll be able to withstand anything and still keep growing.

May God help us make it so.