

“Leaves That Never Fall”  
By Rev. Katrina Pekich-Bundy  
Psalm 1

1 Corinthians 3.1-9  
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Gardening is a team sport. Or, at least in my own experience, I have found it to be a communal effort. When I was in seminary I had my first planter. My family gave me a bunch of cacti that I placed outside my apartment for sun. I was very excited to aid in creation and help these little plants thrive in the world. They would have very much liked that, too, I'm sure, but I did not fully understand the sun to water ratio, and at one point a cactus, dry and helpless, seemed to uproot itself from the planter, lean over the side, as if to slowly try to escape my inexperience. At the time I told the congregation I was serving this story, and when I left that church, the staff gave me a plastic plant.

At the next church I shared this same story, and was met with plenty of advice on how to care for plants - what kind of plants, what kind of soil, how much water, and more. Rob and I began a garden and like even experienced gardeners, we had some success and still some to learn. We grew okra, so much that I don't think we've eaten okra in eleven years. I gained some more indoor plants, and people gifted us with easy house plants. Some survived, some thrived, some will never see the light of day again.

I gained more and more plants over the years. Some successfully made it from Indiana to our yard. When we came here in June of 2021 to meet you all, I brought up some of my most precious plants. I gave them to a good friend in town and asked if she would look over them until we moved. I told her that if I didn't get the job, she inherited a bunch of my favorite plants.

We returned that August, and she had doubled the size of my plants! I think they cried the day I took them from her to bring to my house. But, they have survived, and since living here we have been given hostas and ferns. Our vegetable garden last year was a complete flop, mostly due to operator error, but we'll try again this year.

I'm still no green thumb, but all of my knowledge and plants have come from others who have gardened, either for fun or professionally, and it has been a communal experience. Many people garden as a way to reconnect with nature and to have alone time, but they learned their gardening knowledge from someone. They gathered the seeds from somewhere - whether it was from another plant someone gathered, or at a store, where someone else harvested the seeds and packaged them, or from a plant someone else gave them. Last year we had a volunteer corn stalk pop up with thanks to the squirrel community. Sometimes we garden alone, but it is with thanks to those who have gone before us, those who toiled hard in the earth and learned lessons they passed along to us. We have the Indigenous people to thank for the ways in which they cared for this earth, their knowledge of the earth, and we have so much we could learn from their ways of being with the earth.

Our scripture passage today isn't exactly about gardening, but offers a great gardening message. The people of the church in Corinth have been disagreeing. This is pretty common in Paul's letters. He usually was writing to end disagreements or tell people to shape up. When the

communities saw Paul's return address on his letters I imagine someone looked around and said, "I'm not going to be the one to read it!"

The issue at stake here is that the members of this community have begun attaching themselves to specific leaders - Paul and Apollos. Some are connected to Paul, and say, "I follow Paul!" And others are more connected to Apollos, saying, "I follow Apollos!" It might be the equivalent of saying in this community, "I follow Rev. Katrina!" While others say, "I follow Rev. Dr. Andrew Pomerville!" The allegiance shouldn't be to the person, but to God. We find this in politics, too. We assign ourselves to one political party or leader of that party, and when we do that, we can lose sight of the goals and values that we wish to achieve.

Paul tells the people that Paul and Apollos work together, and the people should, too. The metaphor of gardening is, "I planted, Apollos watered, and God gave the growth." Another translation says, "God gave the increase." One person plants, one person waters, but ultimately it is God doing the increase. It isn't about human achievements, it is about communal effort that sees God's efforts.

We are an achievement-based culture. We strive for validation through grades or money or prestige. We do these things through pushing ourselves harder and harder. The culture doesn't see value in team work, or in rest, or in community the way that faith sees it. We lean on achievements we can perceive - numbers are especially easy to count. How many people show up to an event, what grade someone is given, etc. Ministry is much more difficult to address. How do we know if a ministry is successful? How do we know we have reached someone? Sometimes people will tell stories - stories of the ways in which a church community has helped them get back on their feet, or feel connected, or feel like they have belonged. I love hearing those stories. But, those stories aren't often shared.

Ministries like the food pantry and Community Café can offer numbers, but even numbers don't always show impact. If twenty families come through the food pantry line on a Tuesday, we know we've somehow impacted that family, but for how long? And what are their other needs? And how do we know if there are others in the community who also could benefit from the food pantry? While I would say our food ministries are successful, there's always more that has to be done, which is not a reflection on the ministries or the great leaders, but on the state of the world.

And when we hold an event or have a ministry, and we judge its success by our numbers or what we perceive as successful, what does that say about God? As I think about God giving an increase, it occurs to me that if we misjudge or mislabel something as a failure, that actually God would label as a success, that we are unable to see God at work in the world.

This happens when we rely too heavily on humanity - when we rely on ourselves, on leaders. Each week on Thursdays we take a mid-week break at the Chapel. We have been reading through the Psalms and doing art. When we meditated on Psalm 1, I was feeling quite exhausted that day. I read this passage and commented out loud, "It's really hard to try and keep your leaves from dropping all the time." And someone else said, "But you aren't the one expected to keep them up - it's God who prevents the leaves from falling."

We rely too much on ourselves. We don't reach out to one another and ask for help, and in some cases, we don't even let on that we need help or give space for it.

Consider something you have been spinning your wheels about lately. Have you asked for help? What would collaborating look like? Now, as someone who can do it all herself, thank you very much, I know that collaborating can be difficult. If we go back to that gardening metaphor, it's easy to say, "Ok, my task is planting and yours is watering," but that means we have to have some trust, and not hover when we think they're watering too much or not enough. We learn to communicate in useful ways.

How can you collaborate with others, and with God? What can we co-create together to grow in faith and love and justice? May God increase in your lives and hold up all your leaves. Amen.