

The Garden of God

Soil Preparation Part I: Busting Sod and Picking Rocks

Luke 5:1-11 by Patty Friesen (April 17, 2016)

Where I grew up in northern Alberta, farmers were still homesteading 40 years ago. This meant they bought a quarter of land full of boreal forest or “bush” from the Alberta government for \$1/acre and committed to live on that quarter for a number of years. They left the comforts of established farms and easy access to town to live in isolation off grid roads. We had homesteaders in our congregation at Bluesky Mennonite Church, brave souls who were investing huge loans in tearing down scrub trees with caterpillars, pushing them into long windrows and burning them for weeks, then painstakingly picking rocks and finally disking in the windrow ash and planting.

It was tough going and crops were even more susceptible to early and late frosts than crops here. Homesteaders were risk-takers, hard-workers and were often poor and relied on nature to feed them moose and bear and deer. We town dwellers sometimes called homesteaders “bushed” – meaning they looked or acted differently than townsfolk, but we had to respect them for their initiative and imagination for a future in an extremely inhospitable environment. Our local softball team was called the Sod-Busters in honour of homesteading toughness in busting bush sod.

Jesus called disciples who were kind of bushed themselves or fished – kind of poor, subsistence fishermen who were independent and relied on nature to feed them. It’s these kind of folks whom Jesus called as disciples and called them away from what they knew how to do into something they didn’t know how to do – fish for people. It was groundbreaking – breaking up something that was already established for something

entirely new. They would be risk-takers, taking their Jewish religion on a new path following a Jewish teacher who called himself the Son of God. It was extremely risky business – life-threatening in fact. They would be tearing up the old order of law-based religion with its hierarchy of priests and religious authorities for a new soil of grace and egalitarianism.

The miraculous catch of fish and Peter's call to leave everything and catch people in the gospel of Luke is the parallel story to Saul's miraculous encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus and his call to make disciples in Acts 9. Both Peter and Paul were called dramatically, through a miraculous event, while they were in the midst of their routine activities, and both were given a commission to devote themselves to bringing others to Jesus. The miraculous catch of fish reminds us that Jesus's mighty works are not unlike the works of Moses, Elijah and Elisha where God provided manna, oil and barley bread to feed the people. Jesus provided an abundance of fish. The work of God's kingdom, therefore, will be accompanied by signs of God's gracious love. It will inaugurate a time of abundance and blessing.

The call of the disciples teaches us several things about Jesus. First of all, the fishermen had done nothing to warrant or merit Jesus' call. Regardless of what Jesus may have seen in the fishermen, to content that he called the most capable or most qualified to be his disciples would contradict an important element in the Gospel story. The fishermen were not called because of their qualifications, character or potential. God's call is as unpredictable as it is unmerited. Second, the call to discipleship did not come in a holy place, the temple or a synagogue but in the midst of the fishermen's daily work. The point is that God is not limited to the official holy places like church but actually

calls people in every area of our lives – our homes, our farms, our workplaces, our gardens. Thirdly, Jesus commissions the fishermen to call others in the same way that they were called – outside the walls of the holy places, to meet people in their workplaces and homes, yards and gardens and to invite them to this new way of living. It was as grassroots (pun intended) as a movement could be – right at the heart of where people live and work. These encounters with Jesus came upon rich soil that had been prepared by the Holy Spirit. People were ready when they met Jesus to leave everything, to make the life-changes necessary to follow him. What makes for rich soil in our lives?

Patrick and I have been gardening for 20 years now – as long as we have been married. Our first garden was at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary in Elkhart, Indiana. We didn't know what we were doing but it seemed like an earthy, radical thing to do – to plant a garden. We hadn't paid attention to our mothers' gardening – just reluctantly picked peas and shelled them. We didn't know you need to prepare soil. We had a patch of ground on the seminary yard and we just dug holes and threw in seeds. It was a terrible garden – spotty, poor germination. When our grandmothers came for our wedding they were horrified. Our grandmothers were both farmers and extreme gardeners and we had invited them to preach at our wedding. They both mentioned tending our vegetable and marital garden with care. We think of them every time we plant.

What makes our hearts a hospitable place for God's seeds to germinate? Sometimes we may be a little root-bound, a little full of rocks, a little set in our ways, a little unforgiving, a little stubborn. What breaks up sod in our lives? I hate change but I believe change is the spade or the disk that mixes things up in my life. Whether I want it

or not, change descends upon me through family circumstances, work, church, health. Something happens to painfully turn me over, expose me and reposition me. Whatever I was trying to hold onto, financial security, relationship security, a paid mortgage, gets dug up and turned over.

For example, I never expected to live in Saskatchewan. Saskatchewan was what we drove through from Alberta to get to family reunions in Manitoba. I had lived in exciting cities like Edmonton and Portland, Oregon. Patrick and I enjoyed a decade of exciting urban ministry in Minneapolis. We loved our life there with its smooth bike paths along the Mississippi River. We had just bought a house and renovated it and were putting down roots when the spade of conflict and burnout dug deep into my work life and turned it over. It was what Dr. Brene Brown calls falling flat on our faces – before we can rise strong in her new book *Rising Strong*. It was a painful, heart-breaking process to uproot and move to Saskatoon. It took our ministries in completely different directions – Patrick at Nutana Park Mennonite Church and me in chaplaincy at the Rosthern Mennonite Nursing Home. We have been here now as long as we were in Minneapolis and now we can say the spade of change, the sod busting was good for us.

I thought I was done with sod-busting, that I had established the perfect garden soil of humility in my heart but it seems like the Holy Spirit likes turning soil and picking rocks. Luke's gospel is full of plant metaphors for the work the Holy Spirit does to make us the Garden of God. We will work our way through Luke's plants this spring and summer and through the rich spiritual work in our lives that is illustrating in gardening. The Garden of God is hard rewarding work as is our own gardens. Let us pray...

You are the gardener, O God, we are the soil. Make of us new earth. Cultivate the dry, hard patches, rain your grace upon us and shine your love. Make new shoots of faithfulness germinate within, budding sprouts of goodness and kindness, patience and generosity. We hear your promise that a tree of life will rise up within us and the leaves will not wither in heat, nor dry up in times of drought. The fruits of the Spirit will ripen and hang heavy, a harvest of love and joy to feed ourselves and all others around us.

Amen.