

Soil Preparation Part II: Fertilizer

Luke 6:1-11 by Patty Friesen (April 24/16)

I've been watching re-runs of MASH this winter and in one episode, the MASH unit needs penicillin. A soldier in the confessional offers Father Malcahay a stash of penicillin if Father Malcahay brings some other drugs in exchange. The gentle ethical priest finds himself in a moral dilemma of breaking the law in order to do a higher good. In a conversation with himself, he reflects that Jesus himself occasionally broke the law to do a higher good, which is what is happening in Luke 6 today.

Today's scripture shows Jesus breaking the Sabbath, not once but twice. Just in case we didn't get it the first time, Jesus is the Lord of the Sabbath and is redefining Sabbath laws because he has the authority to do so. Jesus inaugurates a new era where people's needs trump strict adherence to religious law. This is in conflict with the old religious order and brings down the fury of the religious leaders.

Jesus and his disciples are gleaning wheat by hand in order to eat it because they are hungry. Hebrew law allowed harvesting from neighbours' fields by hand and not by sickle, meaning if you were that hungry, you were allowed to glean enough that you could grasp by hand, rub off the chaff and eat – a generosity that paralleled the gift of manna that was just enough bread to eat in a day. Jesus' feeding his disciples in this way, parallels all the other feeding stories in the Old Testament of manna and the widow's oil and flour that never ran out during the three years of famine in Israel.

Jesus' healing the man with the withered hand is also in the healing traditions of the Old Testament, the healing waters in the wilderness and Elijah and Elisha's raising the dead. Feeding and healing people are ethical imperatives that trump strict adherence

to the letter of the Sabbath law where you would refuse help to people on the basis that you were not supposed to work on the Sabbath. Jesus is saying the point of Sabbath is that love of God cannot be separate from love of neighbor and that love of neighbor is how we show love to God.

Last week, Jesus broke ground, busted up the sod of hard-hearted religion by calling the least of society, fishermen to be his disciples. Today, he is preparing more soil for the kingdom of God by mixing in some fertilizer. Stirring up some stink and conflict to create new ground for the seeds of his teaching. Fertilizer is the second stage of soil preparation in the garden of God. For our purposes, I'm not referring to chemical fertilizer but something much more organic and smelly and rich with nutrients.

Last fall on Cow Sunday, we learned that dairy cows contributed a lot of rich fertilizer for fields around Osler. Soil that was rocky and depleted was replenished for grain farming by this gift from the cows. When Patrick and I needed such fertilizer for our depleted garden last spring, we looked to Lloyd and Loretta's cows for help. So eager was I for their help that I drove my pick-up right up to the axles in manure and mud and Lloyd had to pull me out with the tractor before tipping the bucket into the truck bed. With mud and manure flying off my wheels, I drove red-faced off the farmyard. On the way to the city, all the Mercedes kept their distance from me. That load gave us the best garden we've had in 20 years.

Besides cow manure, Patrick and I also compost. With our free composter from the city of Saskatoon, we throw in egg shells, vegetable skins, coffee grounds and apple cores all winter long. By this time of year, it is a steamy mash of goodness waiting to

also be added back into the garden for earthworms to enjoy. The compost pile is a rich metaphor for the spiritual life. Writer Jane Cannato reflects on her compost pile.

I needed the composter. I needed to witness the transformation of those vegetable parts, hopeful that a similar process was happening within me. I needed the awareness that just as each scrap of vegetation was being changed as one season flowed into the next, so I too, in God's time, would experience the miracle of transformation. What would I place on the compost pile that is me? Impatience, most definitely. And confusion. Doubt. And a touch of the control freak. I can throw in some anger which can generate quite a bit of heat. Broken relationships will have to go in there – dead friendships that have no hope of bearing fruit and the pain that comes from going separate ways. Words spoken in haste and deed performed with insensitivity. Feelings I've shoved aside because they're too raw, too hard or too rotten.

Quite a compost pile! And what a stench! But in due season, and with a little care, all the pieces added to a compost pile disintegrate. They'll smell. They'll generate heat. Individual elements will become unrecognizable, but part of the essence remains, hidden within the dark, rich humus, the compost pile will become.

Humus. Of earth, the ground, the soil. Human. An earthly one. I am of earth. My own humus, product of my life's compost pile, fertilizes the transformation process that allows me to become human. Humus. Human. Humility. I am earthly. Only God can make something productive of my earthiness.

The lessons of the compost pile have been invaluable, a resource for embracing the parts of me that are in need of God's healing touch. Carl Jung spoke of the shadow sides of our personalities. For each of our strengths, there is a weakness that gets in the

way of our relationships and trust of God. The stuff that belongs in the compost. What the process of composting tells me is that these challenging parts of my personality are important as raw material for spiritual growth. Composting teaches me that I am responsible for participating in God's work in my life by identifying what is need of transformation, by putting my refuse in a designated place and trusting God to help me become a better Christian. Composting asks me to trust the process.

As I have become more familiar with composting, I have learned that there are five key elements to the process: brown and green organic matter, moisture, air, biodegraders and temperature. All five processes work together to make something productive. Brown dead stuff: dried grass, dead leaves are rich in carbon. Who knew death was necessary to life? What has to die within me – what self-image and hurtful behavior has to die in order for a happier marriage and more integrated self and better leadership skills? Painful, painful deaths. There is no other way. The brown dead stuff is necessary.

Green stuff. Living organic material is necessary also. Fruit and veg, green grass clippings and even weeds are rich in nitrogen necessary for compost. Green stuff heats up the compost pile, accelerating the work of disintegration and transformation. The green parts of our spiritual lives are the untapped or unrecognized potential – what is still green in us – our unused talents – our undiscovered artistic and athletic abilities. This greenness does not diminish as we age. A beloved member of Nutana Park, Verna Nickel learned how to play the violin at age 65. She has now passed and I own her violin and I'm inspired by her example. Learning something new, a sense of humour, courage and acceptance are green matter that give life to ourselves and those around us.

Moisture. Having too much or too little slows down the process. Rain is good but can be too much. Composters have lids to control and retain moisture. In my internal composter – tears are usually what keeps the moisture going but sometimes I have to put a lid on it.

Air. Compost needs to breath, gentle turning the pile with a pitchfork allows the air to move through. My interior pile needs gentle stirring too, which I do through lighting candles and journaling and prayer – the gentle self-examination and turning over worries to God who is the Breath of Life.

Biodegraders are bacteria as well as earthworms are essential to the process. They move through the mess, eating it and helping it along. The organisms that help me process God in my life are my fellow chaplains and women ministers who listen, encourage and ask tough questions monthly. I'm so privileged to have their wisdom and trust. They are wonderful earthworms.

The final requirement for composting is time and temperature. The fluctuation of temperature from season to season is necessary to the process. We bring what is compostable, we yield to the work of God and then we wait, sometimes season after season with hope and expectation that the Gardener who began a good work in us will be faithful to complete it. Let's pray...Gracious God, thank you for your work in our lives, even through the most painful composting processes. Thank you for loving us enough to desire the fruitfulness of our lives for your service. Help us, give us strength and wisdom to turn over to you what needs transforming and trust your timely work to give us the new life you desire for us. Amen.