

Gleaners in God's Garden

Ruth 2:17-23/Luke 12:22-34 by Patty Friesen (Aug.14/16)

The book of Ruth isn't so much a love story as it is an eating story. Hunger is the impetus for Naomi's family moving back and forth between Moab and Bethlehem and shapes the beginning and ending of each chapter. Hunger is what drives Ruth to Boaz's fields. Ruth chapter 1 begins with a famine in the land of Israel, particularly in the town of Bethlehem, Bet-lechem as it is called in Hebrew, which means house of bread. Suddenly the house of bread is left with only crumbs to glean and Elimelech moves to Moab with his wife Naomi and two sons. The sons grow up and take wives, Orpah and Ruth. Suddenly Elimelech and his two sons die leaving Naomi bereft.

Ruth hears that the Lord had considered his people and given them food back in Bethlehem so she sets out to return to this house of bread. She tells her daughters-in-law to return to their mothers' houses for they have no obligation to her and she doesn't have the resources to take care of them. Orpah turns back but Ruth returns with Naomi. They arrive back in Bethlehem at the beginning of the barley harvest. The barley harvest signals that there is indeed food to be had in Bethlehem but how will two landless widows have access to it?

In Deuteronomy 24:19 God had established a harvest policy; "When you reap your harvest in your field and forget a sheaf in the field, you shall not go back to get it; it shall be left for the alien, the orphan and the widow, so that the Lord your God may bless you in all your undertakings."

Chapter 2 begins with Ruth offering to glean the fields as both alien and widow. "As it so happened," scripture says, suggesting not just coincidence but divine

providence, she came to the part of the field belonging to Boaz who was of the family of Elimelech and Naomi. Boaz finds out who is she and that she has been taking care of Naomi and invites her to glean only his fields where she will be safe. He invites her to eat with the reapers, dipping her bread in the wine. Verse 14 is the key verse; “She ate until she was satisfied, and she had some left over.” She ate until she was satisfied and she had some left over. That is the whole goal of God’s harvest policy – that all may eat until satisfied and still have some left over. It is repeated throughout the scriptures’ feeding narratives – eating until satisfied and some leftover to share with whomever else needs it.

Ten years ago at Vincent Massey Elementary School in Saskatoon, a child passed out in class. In the sick room, he told his teacher, Debra Heinrichs, a member of Nutana Park Mennonite Church, that he had not eaten breakfast or lunch because there was nothing to bring from home. That children would go hungry and unable to study in this wealthy country enraged Debra and there is nothing like the righteous rage of a good Mennonite teacher. She got her colleagues and principal on board to start serving breakfast and lunch at school, donated by local restaurants and businesses and the Child Hunger and Education Program was born. They worried about their students during summer break and started bringing peanut butter sandwiches out to the inner city playgrounds.

The CHEP program realized that they needed to help families help themselves. This blossomed into a Kids Kitchen where children learn basic cooking and nutrition skills in a fun atmosphere. CHEP continues to grow with collective kitchens for bulk cooking for families and baby food processing. CHEP is an amazing Saskatoon coalition

of teachers, social workers, restaurant owners, chefs and farmers who take to heart Ruth 2:14 that everyone eats healthy food until they are satisfied and then still have some leftover. CHEP continues to grow food accessibility and gleaning through community gardens and connecting older people with backyard space and fruit trees they can no longer tend with people who need space or want to glean from fruit trees or alleyway rhubarb.

The culmination of biblical justice is in this food imperative, to eat well! That's one bible commandment I don't have any trouble obeying.

Vancouverites Alisa Smith and J.B. McKinnon lived in an apartment in downtown Vancouver and rode their bikes out to farms around the city gleaning fruit, fish and nuts. Their story inspired Patrick and I to eat locally. Of course, Alisa and J.B. had access to peaches and salmon. But in Osler, Patrick and I have access to Anna's Orchard fruit, Pineview chicken, Living Soil carrots, Howard Boldt's eggs and honey and Floating Gardens eggplants. We're fortunate also that Don and Lou Friesen from Waldheim bring in noodles, honey, flax, beans, sausage, and Funk's bison to Nutana Park Mennonite Church once a month. Innovative Prairie Farm Families has been an awesome connection for Nutana Park. We have people coming to church for food who would never come to worship. We know they aren't church members because they park the wrong direction in the church parking lot. It is a wonderful sight to watch people patiently waiting in line for their meat and veg. It is a wonderful urban/rural/producer/eater relationship and abundance that benefits everyone involved.

Luke's gospel reminds us to trust in God's abundance and providence and not hold too tightly to what we have or what we need. For we in the middle class, our issue

is not having enough food but how to share our abundance, how to not worry about accumulating more but letting go of what we have. Patrick and I had an apple tree that spread into the back alley and it used to bug me that neighbours would just help themselves and kids would use apples as baseballs but then I would think of Boaz's generosity in allowing Ruth to glean and I can let those apples go. We have other urban gleaners in our alley as well, guys on bicycles with garbage bags to pick through the recycling bins for bottles and other treasures. I used to be sort of embarrassed about that and not make eye contact as I drove past in my new car but now I wave and say hi and they are very friendly and unembarrassed by their gleaning or my wealth.

I always say that food is one of our greatest resources here at Osler Mennonite Church. We are great producers and cooks. We've got the best potlucks of any church I've been a part of. We are known for our food, which is why Pastor Josh Wallace comes from the Warman Food Bank to talk to us about food for Osler and why it is so fitting that the discussion for an Osler Community Garden began here in the coffee room.

Young women with children from Parkview Cove or Pirates Cove as someone has called it on the southwest part of town are interested in gardening but have no space with their small yards and that need for space combined with Wilf Buhler's generous offer of a half acre behind Floating Gardens greenhouse has combined to form this exciting new venture of community building and food. Mennonites and Pirates working together to raise food in Osler. We are hoping to come under CHEP's umbrella for community garden start-up, grant funding and support so CHEP continues to grow in its food mission.

These Osler community gardeners are hard-working smart young families that we need in our church but they may never come to church. My hope is that they will get to

know and trust us as gardeners first and then as Christians and want to come to church. Or it may be that the garden itself becomes church – fellowship, encouragement and spiritual inspiration beyond these walls.

Next Sunday Zac will share what he has gleaned from his summer of working for Osler Mennonite. It will be his last workday as he packs for Canadian Mennonite University. I've appreciated his willingness to do whatever Terri Lynn and I told him and appreciated his leadership at Camp Shekinah and Vacation Bible School. Blessings on you Zac in your last week here and as you go to CMU. Let us pray:

Gracious God, you have abundantly blessed us with the families and faith we were raised in and with health and resources to learn and grow and share with others. Thank you for the abundance of this garden season and the joy of fresh food that we share with family and friends and strangers. Help us not to hold too tightly to the gifts you have given but guide us in the ways you are calling us to release them for your work here at home and around the world. Amen.