Reflection for Monday, July 24, 2023

Many thanks to all those who offered interpretations of our parable on Sunday. I hope we can do more of these interactive sermons! In the spirit of the parable as participative interpretation, I am copying my personal parable below. Want to write your own parable and share it? Let me know!

In the meantime, I hope you enjoying God’s creation on these bright summer days.

In faith,

Elizabeth



*painting by Claude Monet*

A Garden Parable

The Beloved Community, is like this:

A man and a woman plant a garden. They tend the soil carefully, removing the plastic sheets that covered the soil, and, to the best of their ability, tearing out the plastic netting which was once attached to sod.

After that, they proceed in a seemingly random way. They plant fruit trees for fruit and shade, and the try to find native and drought-tolerant plants which will attract bees and butterflies. But mostly they find themselves operating on the basis of attraction and pleasure. They love the plant that has the silver leaves and they love the smell of sweet peas; they toss some parsley seeds and California poppy seeds into the ground simply because someone offered them as gifts. Yes, they plant rosemary because it smells great, is good for cooking, and bees like it, but also because they have discovered a graceful weeping rosemary that hugs the ground in a in a beautiful way.

They learn that they should plant thirsty plants on the west side of the front yard where they will be drenched twice a day by the neighbor’s sprinkler. They learn that a flock of turkeys may dislodge plants before they are established. The man and woman put out a stone bowl of water for the birds in the backyard, but it seems that all creatures need water and one night their dog surprises a skunk as it drinks. The dog gets sprayed. This is a lesson to remember whether or not it is a parable. Jays and finches and squirrels also like the water bowl. One morning a possum is found sleeping in the dog bed on the patio.

“What is your plan?” ask bemused visitors when they visit the garden. “Plan?” the man and the woman repeat blankly. Perhaps the best thing they can say is that “Our plan is to try to grow things and see what happens.”

When the hearers of this parable heard this story, they were perplexed and dissatisfied. “Explain this to us,” they said to God.

God, reclining in the shade at the edge of the garden said, “The man and the woman are people of faith, and they are slowly learning that faith is open-ended. They cannot always know what they believe *in*, just that they believe. They plant some plants that die, and they learn that this is the way of all life: things perish and change, but the dead plant has left its goodness in the soil so that other things may grow better. God wastes nothing. They learn to work with what they are given—sun, seeds, the neighbor’s irrigation system. God gives gifts that we must practice recognizing.

Some plants only seem to die, but come back in season. Other plants drop their seeds as they wilt and dry. Then, months later—a resurrection of cosmos, scabiosa, poppies, parsley, and sunflowers. Things that the man and the woman did not plant appear—an aster, blooming weeds, even roses. This is the sign of a previous hand in the garden, perhaps God’s. A garden’s history, God tells us, is infinite and subject to constant transformation.

The garden does not belong solely to the man and the woman and their dog. Hummingbirds, possums, hawks, doves, scrub jays, bees, moths, finches, skunks, (alas) squirrels, and even the occasional oriole or cedar waxwing visit or abide. The Beloved Community is utopian, a place of shared co-existence. God asks that we pay attention to who else lives in our home with us.

This garden is like the realm of God. It is a place where the man and the woman toil happily, together and alone, discovering that their random arrangements flow into the divine design that God has in mind. It is a place where bindweed twines around the giant sunflower stalk and the squirrels plant unwanted walnuts that sprout up overnight into tenacious saplings. It is a place where the man and the woman learn to enjoy the tart calamansi, a fruit they had never heard of before. The garden is a mystery in process and it is always, no matter the season, complete and whole. The realm of God is like a garden in which a man and a woman plant and grow things in faith, believing only that the design is not theirs to control, only to nurture and enjoy. They plant themselves into the wholeness, hoping that they too can change and grow along with the garden.