

A Lent for Blossoms

3/2/2022

Rev. Jeff Mansfield



Preaching on:

2 Corinthians 5:20b–6:10

When I moved to Glen Ridge, I had this, all of a sudden coming from Brooklyn, enormous backyard. And I thought, oh man, I am going to just go to my roots like my grandfather before me and I am going to grow tomatoes. I'm going to grow so many tomatoes. And I wasn't going to just plant them in the ground of course. I built a garden bed and I filled it up with only the finest soil. And I got this organic cow manure. Can you imagine that I spent the extra money on making sure that the cow manure was organic? And I filled the bed entirely with this stuff. And I got these beautiful plants and I built these giant cages around them. And I put that bed ... I mean, I calculated the angle of the sun and I wanted to make sure it was going to get lots of sun, but not get too much sun.

And I had the hose going out there so that I could water them every day. And those little plants shot up like weeds. You wouldn't believe it. They grew and they grew and they grew. They surpassed the cages. They were towering above me. And I was just imagining tomatoes the size of grapefruits that I was going, my family was going to be dining on, because nobody knew how to grow tomato plants like I did. And summer just kept progressing and there was nothing on these plants and everybody else had tomatoes that they were trying to give away, they're bringing by the house, "We have so many." And I didn't have nothing. So I asked a gardening expert friend of mine. I said, "Look, I did everything right. How dare these plants not produce any fruit?"

And my gardening expert friend said, "Yeah, that's exactly the problem. You did everything right. You treated them too good. You gave them too many nutrients. You gave them too much water. You gave them just the right amount of sun. I mean, there is no reason for this plant to worry about reproducing, about creating fruit. It just feels like this heyday is going to go on forever and ever and ever. And it just wants to grow bigger and bigger and bigger and bigger and bigger. It doesn't think that summer is ever going to end, because you've made things too perfect. You need to make it less perfect."

And he said, "You've got to stop watering it so much. You've got to cut back. You got to prune these things away. You got to pull these things off. You got to cut back on all this. You got to put some sand on there." And we got a few tomatoes at the very end of the season because I stopped treating them so well and I made them struggle a little bit. And then the squirrels ate all my tomatoes and I didn't get a single one. But that was Glen Ridge at the time. A lot of squirrels that year.

That's an interesting thought for Lent, this idea that we're not going to produce any fruit if we don't have to struggle a little bit, at least. I mean, why do we have to have Lent? Why do we have to come back to it year after year after year? Why do we have to look into the face of sinfulness? And why do we have to look into the ashes and to be told from dust you came and to dust you shall return? Why do we have to go all the way to Holy Week and to the Cross? Why do we have to take that Cross up? Why do we have to deny ourselves? Why? Wouldn't it be better if life was just a heyday, a summer that never ended? Well, my tomato plant says no. And I think Jesus says, no. I think that God says, no. There's got to be a little bit of resistance. There's got to be a little bit of a pull, a little tiny bit of a struggle that causes you to produce your best work, your best life.

I was at my office hours this morning, and the people receiving ashes at Agora cafe. And I got a chance to sit with people and say, Hey, what do you think Lent is bringing to us this year? And it was very interesting to hear what people had to say, because in general, people were feeling like a lot of times, Lent is about turning inward and getting a little bit introspective and praying and maybe quieting down, taking things down a notch, denying ourselves, right? Maybe putting a fence up a little bit with some stimulation and some pleasure. And what people were saying to me is "I don't know if that's that's quite the right feeling for this year." And I had to kind of agree. And I was talking to Amy, one of our members, and I asked her what her feeling was for Lent. And she said, "Well, you know, I feel like I

want to get out more. It's almost like a feeling of being a flower opening up." And what we came to together was this idea of blooming, blossoming.

And when I heard her say that, I thought about something that I've been thinking about this Lent. This phrase was in my head "Calmly plotting the resurrection," Calmly plotting the resurrection. Every year, I've got to come up with some sort of theme to just sort of coalesce my preaching around. And that was there. And it didn't really make sense. And that's ... Sometimes it's a good thing because as a minister you can come out, you can say this thing that doesn't make much sense. Then you can explain it. And then you look like you're a really smart guy, right? But I couldn't explain this one. It was just rolling around in there. But when Amy said this Lent was feeling like a blossoming, it made me remember where this quote came from in the first place. And it came from E.B. White, the children's beloved children's book writer, Charlotte's Web and his wife was a world famous gardener who wrote all these books about gardening.

Her name was Katherine Sergeant Angell White. And in one of the last books that she published towards the very end of her life, E.B. White wrote the introduction. And in that introduction, he was reflecting on the fact that his wife didn't have much more time to live and reflecting on her life. And this is what he said about her: "Armed with a diagram and a clipboard, Katherine would get into a shabby old Brooks raincoat, much too long for her, put on a little round wool hat, pull on a pair of overshoes and proceed to the director's chair. A folding canvas thing that had been placed for her at the edge of the garden plot. There, she would sit hour after hour in the wind and the weather while Henry Allen produced dozens of brown paper packages of new bulbs and a basket full of old ones ready for the intricate interment. As the years went by and age overtook her, there was something comical yet touching in her bedraggled appearance on this awesome occasion. The small hunched over figure, her studied absorption in the implausible notion that there would be yet another spring, oblivious to the ending of her own days, which she knew perfectly well was near at hand, sitting there with her detailed chart under those dark skies in the dying October, calmly plotting the resurrection."

So I'll leave you with that this evening. Lent maybe a time for us to struggle in the right ways, not to pull everything back. You can't take all the water away. You can't take all the nutrients away. You can't cut the plant all the way down to the ground, but to just find the right little resistance. The place where you are working, the place that you are churning through, and invite God into that resistance, that struggle, that hardship with you. Sitting there at the edge of the garden planting the bulbs. Calmly plotting the resurrection and waiting for something to blossom.