

Amending the Soil

delivered by the Rev. Lawrence Wood, 29 June 2009

William Alexander wanted a garden. Thanks to the help of a landscape architect, the local hardware store, library books, and amazingly tolerant family, he made progress. Once you get started on a project like that, of course, there's no end; it's as bad as boating.

Hired men terraced the garden, because the lot sloped considerably; their heavy machinery got mired in clay, and remained there for a winter. PVC pipes lay exposed like mockery.

He and his wife had been through this before, when they had bought their dilapidated house in the Hudson Valley and had spent every last dollar and hour to make it inhabitable. Surely putting in a garden couldn't be as bad as all that.

But like Mr. Blandings building his dream house, Bill Alexander dreamt of a garden that would ease his soul and make the neighbors notice. When he read about cost-effective watering drip lines and eco-friendly compost systems, he was green – green with envy.

As the garden grew, his hobby became a job in itself, with the hope of being compensated in fresh produce. And his family did say that they enjoyed it.

At the end of the summer, just out of curiosity, he sat down to figure what he'd saved by growing his own vegetables. There had been potatoes, leeks, peppers, sugar snap peas, squash, cucumbers, melon, and (best of all) Brandywine tomatoes. You can't find flavorful tomatoes at the store. With much patient coaxing, Bill Alexander had managed to get nineteen of them.

Okay. So there was the cost of construction, plus fencing and stump removal. Add in live traps, cedar mulch, a hedge trimmer, seed and fertilizer, various books and gardening magazines. He could amortize some of those costs, and some costs were attributable just to certain vegetables, but even after making these allowances, he had to admit that he had spent a lot for his Brandywines. In fact, to his horror, he found that he hadn't saved anything. Each tomato had cost him \$64.

Those were good tomatoes, to be sure – but \$64? That sounded more like Beluga caviar or Kobe beef.

When he told his wife, she said, "Those tomatoes you stuffed with crabmeat? They were good." "No," he said, "not dinner-menu prices. I'm saying they cost that much *to grow*."

She just stared and said finally, "Well, we see this," which is a phrase from psychotherapy that she uses with patients who have just described something absolutely insane.

Gardening is a common affliction. You put your hopes in the ground, putting your hopes in those hopes, never thinking about the ground. You can spend a lot of money on landscaping, irrigating, lighting and security; you can pay big bucks for heirloom seeds, but the most important part of the garden is the least expensive, the least sexy, the most basic aspect of all – what you get on your knees and under your fingernails.

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In the thirteenth chapter of Matthew's gospel, Jesus speaks to the gardeners among us. Anyone who has ever tried to raise tomatoes or zinnias or rutabagas can appreciate what he has to say.

First he talks about how the word of God can fall on good soil or thin soil, on receptive or unreceptive ears. If we're particularly flinty or defensive, for example, what God has to say to us isn't going to sink in. On the other hand, those times when we feel like dirt are probably pretty fertile for our faith.

Let's listen to the whole thing:

And he told them many things in parables, saying: "Listen! A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. Let anyone with ears listen!"

Matthew 13:3-9

Have you noticed that it's not about the seeds? It's all about the soil.

The environment in which our faith grows makes all the difference.

Good people who start off in hard, hard churches may find that their faith gets nowhere. All they hear is negative and narrow, with no generosity of mind or spirit, and at last these decent people need a different environment in which to grow. Likewise, very welcoming, open-hearted churches with no nutritional value may leave them feeling starved.

A faith needs depth and sustenance. You may be able to see what's in store for you by looking around at others in your church.

Do you see folks who have discovered contentment, simplicity, philanthropy, who are comfortable with questions but have also found things to affirm? Do you see some potential mentors? If so, this may be a good place for you to grow.

Jesus often drew upon the imagery of the countryside he knew well, and spoke of faith as a dynamic, living thing. It was not an object to be gotten, but a way to live.

In this thirteenth chapter of Matthew's gospel, with these parables of arable land, he makes us think about what we will do to make sure our faith grows. There's a wink in his words: maybe we have taken it all for granted. But like anything else, our faith will take work; and the things that will help it will make a big difference not just for us, but all the environment around us.

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Do you know how to grow hydrangeas with different colors? Shade has something to do with it. If part of the plant gets more direct sunlight, it will lose its vividness.

But the biggest factor in determining color is the pH balance of the soil. If it's more acid, you get blue flowers; if it's more alkaline, you get pink.

Low pH allows the hydrangea to absorb aluminum, so if you want that vivid cobalt, spread some peat or pine bark; or if you want more of a purple, put down some lime.

This is called amending the soil.

French vintners speak of *terroir*, or local qualities in the soil that give wines their regional distinctiveness; the notes of apple, or cinnamon, that make a Bordeaux different from a Burgundy.

There are things in the soil that make us what we are. This church is what it is, and the schools are what they are, because Darien is what it is. Much of that is wonderful. We prize beauty, and good music, and education.

Of course, there are other local qualities that we might not want to keep flowering. And we will not get anything different unless we amend the soil.

Unless we decide to put something in to counterbalance the materialism, or the pressure to succeed, or the rancorous letters to the editor, that's what we'll keep seeing.

Part of the job of a church is to amend the soil. For generations, this church has stood for values that are a little different from those around us. *Be not conformed*, says the apostle, and indeed we know that our own health, our peace, depends upon drawing those differences.

This is the territory of the \$64 tomato. We stand instead for good stewardship, modesty, generosity. This is the territory of executives. We stand instead for a community of servants. This is a region of sophistication and skepticism. We stand instead for gentle belief.

Some people may not want the soil amended, but if you never put anything new in it, and if you only grow the same thing year after year, eventually the ground will be depleted.

And haven't we all come here because we're a little hungry?

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Over at the parsonage, we've had a bumper crop of rhubarb, followed by strawberries that went to the rabbits, and sunflowers that went to the rabbits, and green beans. They left the basil alone – so we've been enjoying some of that in sandwiches with fresh mozzarella and tomato.

The garden has plenty of potential. We still haven't figured out how to get the grass to grow, but I think that's because our golden retriever has been amending the soil.

This church has plenty of potential, too. Plenty of talented, loving people are ready to roll up their sleeves and try things out. I say, let 'em. If we're willing to get our fingernails dirty, we might grow enough faith here that we'll have to give it away.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

William Alexander. *The \$64 Tomato*. Chapel Hill: Algonquin Books, 2006