



The Table

A 1st century style community in the 21st century

A Synodically-Authorized Worshipping Community

It is eight o'clock in the morning. We turn the corner, now just two blocks away from the urban farm and community garden, where I cultivate soil and souls, and I see them. The herbal session I am scheduled to lead does not begin for another two hours, but three women have already arrived, and are getting to know one another as they wait outside of the locked gate. I want to be excited to see them, but I simply take a deep breath. I was hoping to have some time by myself in the garden this morning before everyone else trickled in. It was a selfish expectation, I guess. Besides, I should have known better. This scene has played out all season long. Eager families. Anxious women. Relieved volunteers. People seeking something meaningful to do in an outdoor, spacious setting.

This has not been a program season of *trickling in* at Alice's Garden Urban Farm. It has been one of monsoon participation. We are all still adjusting to how we may be able to claim some semblance of fullness in the midst of a pandemic that dismantled almost every one of our routines and left so many feeling empty. This 2.2 acre farm, with all of its generous offerings, has become one of a few spaces in Milwaukee where folks are able to gather responsibly, openly, with purposeful activities. Not many alone moments of lingering in the labyrinth, or harvesting Holy Basil, Lettuce Leaf Basil, Pineapple Sage for me. This garden has become *paradise found* for city dwellers who prior to COVID-19 only read about it, drove by it, or "once I had bought some tea from Alice's Garden at the Shorewood Farmers Market." Now, even before the key enters the padlock on the double gate, the people gather, yearning for an encounter, a conversation, a knowing that will usher some definition, or just simple joy into their day.

To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven: A time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted; A time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up; A time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance; A time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing; A time to get, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to cast away; A time to rend, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak.

Ecclesiastes 3:1-7

It seemed as though the year 2020 was all of those seasons and times at once; in the world, within our families, on our neighborhood blocks or lanes, and, yes, in our garden as well. As a *farming minister* in such a public place, with every rising of the sun, I had to prepare both the garden and my physical being to become places of refuge, living sanctuaries, for a humanity overcome with so much sorrow, a plethora of questions, a bounty of confusion and disbelief. Long before the year had arrived, throughout the preceding decade, upon crossing the gravel threshold of our garden outdoor parish, as one entered the garden for the very first time, my greeting would be "Welcome Home!" That greeting took on even deeper levels of meaning in 2020 for folks who sometimes stumbled into the garden, or those who entered weeping, and especially persons who were instantly overcome with gratitude for the garden's beauty.

Why has it taken me so long to get here? How could I have just driven by this garden for more than twenty years? I had no idea this place was this big! I cannot believe the diversity of people! Look at all of the birds and butterflies. I just didn't know there was such a place in Milwaukee. You can't even tell that you are in the city! It is so peaceful here. Look at all of the stuff that is going on in here. I wish I could have brought my dad here before the virus took him. What can we do to get more people to come here? Why did it have to take the world to fall apart for me to experience this slice of heaven in my own city?

2021 Synod Assembly Report from The Table, continued

In recent years, I have heard many academics, and other folks, refer to Alice's Garden as a great example of a "third space" or "third place." I had to do some homework to be clear on what they meant. I learned that it is "a sociocultural term to designate communal space, as distinct from the home (first space) or work (second space). The third space has been defined as a (place) where the individual can experience a transformative sense of self, identity and relation to others." Now, when someone "discovers" our urban haven, and is quick to put a third space label upon it, I must correct them with the most loving smile imaginable. Nope. This is the first space. The original space. This is a garden.

So many times over the past seventeen years or so, as I have been blessed to help birth the Beloved Community that is Alice's Garden, I have often thought, and even uttered aloud, *this is all God ever wanted for us*. Just like in that first Garden of Eden, there is life of many kinds, and there is also the knowledge of both good and evil. There is humanity, blessed with the gifts of both caring for the land, and being nourished from it. As COVID-19 deconstructed the patterns and routines of our daily lives, I was able to bear witness, as so many searching souls found solace, mercy, intention, even jubilation on this parcel of earth that had been waiting to receive them. They participated in programs and events that were no longer taken for granted, but appreciated and celebrated.

They came to evening markets where they could purchase vegetables and herbs, candles and bath salts, books and earrings, egg rolls and oven-roasted pizzas from area farmers, entrepreneurs, and chefs. They brought their mats and reusable water bottles for yoga classes under the evening sky. Some wandered in to confront their privilege and racism in reading circles, and part of labyrinth walks that exposed so much that needs to be relinquished. There were those who lined up for free flowers, courtesy of summer festival season that could not happen. Others came for African dance classes, or for evening meditation. There was a late summer floral cherub display honoring Black lives that very much matter, and an autumn art exhibit whose sixteen installations loomed large throughout the garden, representing the hopes and dreams of Brown and Black boys throughout the public school system. From time-to-time, families just brought lunch and some games, just to be somewhere other than home. On Monday evenings there was herbal education and on Wednesday evenings there was church. There was a whole day focused on mushrooms, and several afternoons set aside for guided tours of the garden's diverse ecosystem. There were even a couple of evenings of singing from the heart. A couple of Unity Fires with our Indigenous Communities. The police had to be called once, but the sadness did not loom for long. A day of melting guns and transforming them into tools brought in people from all over the world. And, yes, there were volunteers who made themselves available for weeding, mulching, pruning, planting bulbs. They traveled to the garden for grief circles. I personally held a healing circle for Black women's rage. We also had a Sunday afternoon where you were asked to bring your pillow and blanket to just take a nap. It was a season and a time for almost everything.

"This is more than just a garden, you know." It was his fifth or sixth time to the garden, and he was overwhelmed with gratitude each time he was leaving. I had to gently correct him. There is nothing more than a garden.

- Venice Williams