

The View from Blackwater Bluff — Charles LaFond

As summer winds down at Blackwater Bluff and the vines of autumn squash and pumpkin begin to show fruit, one can yet see a summer's vegetable garden that spiraled into disaster!

In mid-May a friend and I planted a garden, a huge garden — with straight rows of carrots, broccoli, potatoes, beets, cucumbers, peppers and tomatoes. With my neighbor's help and the weeding efforts of my friend Diane, we made of a go of it and a tremendous garden grew up.

As the summer progressed, we noticed that the plants were huge and the green fruit voluminous but the ripened fruit never hung long enough for the picking. One night there would be dozens of tomatoes and the next morning — nothing! Deer. We were providing a veggie buffet to the deer. A few cucumbers and some peppers and potatoes are all I could harvest. What I thought would be a bountiful harvest turned out to be not much more than a salad. Next year: a fence!

A personal stewardship lesson came when a friend and I were walking in the garden and she noted that the cucumbers looked good and said how much she loved cucumbers. My first impulse was to offer them to her! I could see twirling there and it would have been easy to pick them up and hand them over.

But my head was then filled with the images of so much work and so little yield. I thought about the rental of the roto-tiller, the hours of weeding (with a freshly herniated disk in my spine). I thought of the rows and rows of plants and the loss of so many vegetables to the deer, night after night! I felt my heart close up. I could feel it crust over with disappointment and anger and regret over my high hopes for the garden. So my impulse to give my friend some cucumbers was suffocated by my own smoke-filled heart that doused the flame of generosity which had burst and then was quickly extinguished. Generosity gave way to a sense of scarcity and self-preservation.

The next morning I went to get my two cucumbers with an angry determination to "take what is mine!" I left the basket in the kitchen. Two cucumbers — two hands. No need of a basket! The long trek to the garden was filled with rationalizing my greed of the previous night. "I deserve those cucumbers!" I thought. "I have so few of them —



how could I give them away?" I thought. "I deserve much more than I have from this 6000% garden!" I fumed. An image of the Grinch Who Stole Christmas flashed before my mind's eye "...a heart two sizes too small..."

And then I learned something. Cucumbers grow under their leaves and vines. You can't see them by just walking by. You have to lift up the vines and search for the cucumbers. And as I knelt in the cool, wet grass, lifting up vines and leaves — I found cucumbers. Huge ones. Lots of them. Some were as long as 15 inches and as big around as your arm. In less than a minute I found twelve cucumbers. I filled a colander but needed two hands to lift it.

I could not stop thinking about the coincidence. One day, in a fit of a scarcity-tantrum I had squashed my impulse to give what I had away. The next day — on my knees — I was faced with the real greed and negativity of my wizened heart. One of my friends says that "coincidence is God's way of keeping a low profile." I knew I was being taught a lesson.

I ended up giving my friend some cucumbers. She was thrilled. But the giving was tainted for me. It would have been more fun to give immediately and joyfully. The experience was a valuable reminder that I want to live out of abundance and not out of scarcity. How we live is at least as important as that we live. When I am taught or reminded of these little life lessons I remember my spiritual director's old saying: "We are all in Jesus' little school-house."

As we enter into autumn, our parishes will be re-opening the conversation about the stewardship of our finances. There will be (I hope) more open

conversation about money and God and scarcity and bounty and giving and receiving.

Good Shepherd Church, Nashua, where I am priest-associate, is about to do their stewardship in a whole new way. The open conversation about money and giving will encourage many, discomfort some, and perhaps infuriate a few. I am so proud of them having such a bold conversation about giving. Whenever a church risks the status quo to encourage spiritual transformation, I am encouraged.

As we re-enter the "stewardship season" we will be wrestling with change. Can I change my relationship with money? Can I convert from living out of scarcity to living out of bounty? Can our church have an open and honest conversation about money and gratitude or are we going to continue to cloak it in secrecy and silence? Do we love each other enough to say hard things to each other about greed, giving and gratitude?

In my waning garden I learned a valuable lesson. I was reminded that I want to be a generous person. But I was also reminded that I can easily revert to the more base instinct to hoard and grab and hold and keep what was given to me to share. "But just as you EXCEL in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness and in your love for us—see that you also EXCEL and in your love for giving." (2 Cor. 8:7)

I rely on my parish — the priest, the vestry, the congregation — to remind me how God is calling me to live — to help me to excel as a Christian. I want them to help me to excel in all sorts of Christian virtues. I want to excel in love because my culture encourages me to judge. I want the church to encourage me to excel in self-offering because my culture teaches a "me first" gospel. I want the church to excel in softening my heart because it is so easily hardened. I want the church to preach that all I have comes from God, because the culture preaches the kindergarten mantra of "Mine! Mine! MINE!"

What if instead of wincing at stewardship this year, we welcomed the transformation? We are made in God's image.

God is a lover and a creator. So we must be, too. Our job is to become who we are.