

## **You reap whatever you sow.**

*A sermon preached in Christ Church, Aspen, by the Rev. Bruce McNab.*

*6<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 10, Yr. C. [On the occasion of a Parish Meeting to decide whether to remodel the Church.]*

If you haven't noticed, there's an amazing profusion of flowers right now out in the front garden of the rectory. Joan, the deacon-gardener, could tell us what each plant is called. I can't. I just know that we have lots of pretty yellow flowers, as well as blue ones; quite a few purple ones, some red ones, and clumps of little-bitty white ones. Many of these are pansies; even I know that much. We have pinkish-red coral bells and cobalt-blue lobelia. There are tall, spiky lupines. (I like those.) We have columbines, too, of course, and some kind of sage. (Maybe it's not sage. Whatever it is, the bees like it.) There are also delphiniums nearly ready to bloom—and, last but not least, geraniums. Joan has been known as “the Geranium Lady” everywhere we've lived.

Once, not too many years back, the place where these flowers are growing was just grass and dirt. Three summers ago, ladies in the church paid for landscaping professionals to come and turn that grass and dirt into a real garden. The landscapers planted a few things and Joan added some more things, both then and afterwards. And she fertilized, weeded, watered and loved the garden. Today there's an exhibition of color and beauty where there was nothing but grass four years ago. Grass is o.k., I guess, especially on a golf course or in the outfield at a ballpark, but lots of different pretty flowers growing together in a complementary display is much more enjoyable to see in front of a home. Many of you have magnificent gardens, and you know what I mean.

Gardens – whether the practical, vegetable-sort or the purely ornamental, flowery-sort – take time. They don't just happen overnight. And they don't come together without a plan. Somebody has to have a *dream* of a garden, a vision of what might be possible on that particular plot of earth. Then somebody must do the hard work of breaking up the sod and establishing a suitable place for planting. Preparation is crucial. After that comes the time of planting. Whether gardeners plant seeds or seedlings, planting time is always a period of hope and expectation. Next comes the phase of waiting. —Will the seeds sprout? Will the seedlings survive and thrive? After the waiting, if our garden is blessed, comes the reward. For an ornamental garden, it's the time of blooming flowers and the joy we take in contemplating them; for vegetables, it's the harvest and the pleasure we derive from eating them.

One of the classic proverbs of Holy Scripture – a proverb so obvious that it's also found in the sacred texts just about every culture around the world – is one that St. Paul quoted to the Galatians in the epistle reading we heard this morning: “*You reap whatever you sow,*” and “*we will reap at harvest-time, if we don't give up.*”

To be specific, Paul says to the faction-ridden, indecisive new Christians in the churches of Galatia, “*Do not be deceived; God is not mocked, for you reap whatever you sow.*” To put it in the gardening context that I've been using, you can't plant bull-thistles and expect geraniums—even if you're a fine Christian believer and you pray very hard for God to make those thistles into geraniums. No matter how devout you are, and no matter how faithful you have been in coming to church every Sunday, you shouldn't count on getting something beautiful and desirable in your garden if all you planted was giant ragweed and cockleburrs. Regardless of your piety, the seed you plant, or the baby seedling you carefully put into a little hole in the soil—*that* determines what's going to grow in your garden

The principle that God built into the natural order will always hold. What you plant *will* be what you harvest, whether you're talking literally about gardens or metaphorically about life in relationship to God and other people.

You're probably wondering where I'm going with all this, and so I'll tell you plainly. For the past year or so, as we have pondered the possibility of a building project, we've been like people dreaming of a garden—expanding an old garden, we might say, by adding some new ground to it. We've talked about it, drawn pictures of it, revised our pictures, re-thought our plans, and today we've come to the time when we'll decide

whether we're going to dig up the grass and get started, or not. And we're going to determine what we'll plant there, once we've broken the sod.

I've been involved in a variety of different church building projects, and I'll tell you one important thing up front: a building project is *not* a salvation experience. It's a lot of work. It's costly. And at the end of it, you just have a building—a material structure made of wood, stone, metal and glass—a *thing*. It's not going to get you or anybody else one inch closer to God all by itself. It is simply a means to an end.

By the same token, if you plant a flower garden or a vegetable garden, and you do all the work involved in bringing your dream of a garden to fruition, in the end you just have a bunch of plants—nothing more—*unless* you have a vision that goes further than simply getting the seeds in the ground and seeing the plants come up, a vision that goes beyond the garden itself. An ornamental garden is meant to be enjoyed. It's a thing of beauty. You want to sit in the shade of the trees and watch the bees buzzing around the flowers. Smell the roses. Clip some beautiful buds and put them in a vase so you can get pleasure from them indoors, too. If you've planted watercress and spinach, pole beans, squash, tomatoes and zucchini, you want to savor the fresh produce at your dinner table. You want to notice how much better these taste than veggies bought at the grocery store. And you want to bless your friends with them—especially the zucchini!

As we consider whether to remodel our church and put on a new addition, we need clarity of vision about the project. Like people dreaming of a garden, whose dream must go beyond simply seeing the plants come up, our dream of a renovated church has to extend further than just what the building will look like when the contractor's task is finished. I said that a church building is a means to an end. It's a *tool*, really, to help us accomplish work for which the Spirit of God has given us a vision.

The Vision Statement of Christ Church is printed on all our parish publications: *CHRIST CHURCH—SHARING HIS LOVE*. As I have said many times, our mission is not *mainly* to the people whose names are on the church roll; rather it's a mission *of* us who are members *to* those who are not—whether they're locals, part-timers, or weekend tourists. Our remodeled church, as we have pictured it, is a “tool” to help facilitate that mission.

Christ Church is a body of Christians who believe that God has gathered us here to serve our neighbors as well as the travelers, students, artists, music-lovers, scholars, skiers and other sojourners that come to Aspen every year from many far-off places. Our calling is to share the love of God that was incarnate in Jesus Christ, and to share that love in as many different ways as the Spirit gives us opportunity. The most important ways we share His love are through worship, outreach, and the practice of hospitality. We welcome every stranger and seek to meet each one's needs—spiritual, social, or material, as the case may be. And we invite everyone, our friends and neighbors, area residents and visitors from far away, old and young, to join us on the journey to faithful Christian discipleship and spiritual transformation.

That's not a complicated vision; it's pretty simple to grasp. Being church is about serving *others*, not about serving ourselves. And as we serve them, we serve the Lord who has redeemed us and called us to follow him in the path of self-offering love.

*“Do not be deceived; God is not mocked, for you reap whatever you sow.”* We trusted God for the dreaming; we trust him for the planting; and we will trust him for the harvest. We're planting faith, hope, and love, and we're looking for a harvest of souls. We're going forward with confidence that the same Lord who “*planted*” Christ Church back in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when people from all over America were coming to Aspen to find the Mother Lode, intends that we carry His planting into the 21<sup>st</sup> century—a time when people from everywhere are coming to Aspen to find tranquility or spiritual and physical renewal, to learn more about music or physics or the environment, and to find joy on the slopes of our mountains. A building project may not make large numbers of people become members of Christ Church, but it might make those who go past our church on their way to concerts or events at the Aspen Institute or to go skiing, running or mountain biking realize that the Episcopal Church in Aspen is “here for good.”

We're HERE ...*for good!*