

Compost Chaplain

April 18, 2021

Friends, I have a confession. I'm afraid to compost. We have a lovely organic garden out back, Scott has been lovingly nurturing seeds in a greenhouse all spring, we're feeding Josie organic food, AND, I'm afraid of compost. There's something about the...rot of it all, the stink of it all, the death of it all, that paralyses me with fear.

And so, it was with a substantial personal reservation that I read an article recently by Justin Eisinga, who describes himself as a "Chaplain of Compost." Eisinga writes:

"The stench of death is nearly impossible to contain when organic matter is left to decompose in the open air. If you live on or near a farm, this principle is one you encounter on a regular basis. But you do not need to be a farmer to understand that the scent of decomposition means something altogether wonderful is occurring."

What? The stench of death as a sign of something wonderful? He goes on to quote Wendell Berry:

"'In nature, death and decay are as necessary – are, one may almost say, as lively – as life, and so nothing is wasted.' To build a compost bin is akin to building a tomb, except this tomb is not meant to encase death permanently. The compost bin is a tomb built for resurrection."

I wonder, with Eisinga and Berry's logic, is my avoidance of composting symbolic of our cultural avoidance of death, our tendency to protect ourselves from difficulty, our tendency to sanitize? Could the compost bin, even more than the cross, be the ultimate symbol of the Christian faith? Think about it: we put something in, something whose life is diminished and degraded, and somehow, with time, that which was dying becomes the medium for new life. Of course, in compost just as in resurrection, the resulting life has very little resemblance to the life that was.

But there's a faith lesson there, too. Just as Jesus told Mary "do not hold on to me," and Robert Frost lamented, "nothing gold can stay," so, too, a life rooted in resurrection faith appreciates life as it is but also recognizes that, by its very nature, life is constantly changing. In theological terms, we're constantly moving with Christ through cycles of life, death, and resurrection.

Today, our two scriptures speak to this life, death, and resurrection cycle. The passage that we read from the Gospel according to Luke is one of what we call the appearance stories, stories of Jesus appearing to the disciples after the resurrection. In these appearance stories, there are some common themes. Jesus' first message is one of peace. Out of everything he could have said, his message is peace. He doesn't chastise their abandonment, he doesn't try to rally their vengeance, he doesn't try to encourage their right behavior, he simply speaks of peace. He knows that they're hurting, and he offers them peace, not to numb them, but to center them.

When Justin Eisinga, the self proclaimed “Compost Chaplain” reflects on the Easter experience, he writes:

“While Jesus was up there on the cross, I imagine a flurry of activity as his family, friends, and followers recognized that His death was imminent. I envision Mary Magdalene organizing everything, Joseph of Arimathea gathering the appropriate supplies, and the apostle John comforting everyone in their confusion and sorrow. They were to prepare a tomb, but unlike those of us who compost, they had no idea that this tomb was being built for resurrection. Unbeknownst to them, they were entering a liminal space marked by the feeling of loss and the expression of grief; they understood the sealing of the tomb as a definitive indicator of the finality of death.”

One of the miracles of Easter, then, is to engage the tomb, engage that which we expect to encapsulate death and finality, only to find the transformed materials for a whole different life.

In our gospel today, Jesus invites the disciples to touch the wounds of his hands and feet, this is still him. What was put in the tomb still composes who he is, but like a compost bin, the resurrection has so radically reconfigured him that the disciples have a hard time recognizing what they’re seeing as new life at first. And so, he walks them through the essentials, the “raw material” of the witness of his life, and then he plants the seeds of what they were to grow next: repentance and forgiveness. That is, transformation and healing, change and reconciliation, humility and growth.

In addition to this passage from the Gospel of Luke, Traci read for us from the Acts of the Apostles. While the appearance stories tell us of the disciples’ experiences of the risen Christ in the 40 days after Easter, the Acts of the Apostles tells us of the life of the church in those first months, and years after Jesus’ death.

The passage that we read today is one that the church asks us to read every Easter season. In our Tuesday Bible Study, Jon pointed out that historians debate the veracity of this claim that Jesus’ first followers practiced a radical new economy in which everyone took care of everyone else.

But even more important than whether or not this passage is a statement of history, I’d like to suggest that this scripture gives us another example of what it looks like to live a resurrection life. Whereas a life of death and entombment is rooted in scarcity and fear, a resurrection life recognizes that beauty and new life and hope and growth take root in the compost. A resurrection life sees that mutuality is the way of repentance and forgiveness, and is willing to put its resources toward the common good, trusting that the forces for good will work their resurrection magic amidst that which was entombed.

In his book “The Paradox of Generosity,” Christian Smith reflects that both tangible generosity and spiritual generosity evoke positive feelings, and that these:

“have been shown by studies to reduce stress, tension, and sadness, and lead to lower heart rates, lower skin conduction levels, and lower blood pressure. By contrast, those who ungenerously hold grudges are more angry, feel less in control of their lives, and, partly as a result, exhibit symptoms of unhealthy physical conditions.”

Of course, the question then becomes: How do we cultivate a resurrection spirituality rather than an entombed spirituality? How do we recognize and value compost rather than simply seeing struggle and death as rot and decay? I lift up two practices. The first comes to us from the Potawatomi culture. The Potawatomi have a tradition of gift-giving called *minidewak* in which they express generosity and gratitude. Its roots are in nature’s cycle of plenty and scarcity.

Robin Wall Kimmerer, a biologist, writer, and member of the Potawatomi nation explains that for her community gift-giving is not done because of one’s abundance, but rather is rooted in the interconnectedness of all life. *Minidewak* giving centers on the concept that the well-being of one is intimately linked to the well-being of all.

We have a household in the church that has been engaging in *minidewak* since last fall. Having heard of so many people struggling to pay their rent amidst the pandemic, they’ve been sending a \$300 check every month to the Parson’s Purse with the request that I use it to subsidize the rent of someone in need. This is *minidewak*, giving from the heart.

Some other church members, who did not experience financial hardship amidst the pandemic, have chosen to contribute stimulus funds – some to the church to help sustain the vitality of our ministries, others have made contributions to the Blessing Box, to We All Rise and On the Mark Dyslexia Clinic and St. John’s Homeless Shelter. These actions, too, are *minidewak*, giving from the heart that others may have life.

And so, if cultivating a resurrection spirituality is an interesting concept to you, I ask you to ponder how you might practice *minidewak*, how you might witness to the fact that God’s ways are not death and scarcity and finality, but rather renewal and transformation and abundance. The examples I made were financial gifts, but yours may be baking or gardening or kindness or forgiveness. How might you put flesh on the resurrection by living the idea that pain and rot and death do not have the last word?

The second practice is simpler. You’ve undoubtedly heard of talking to plants. Well, today I encourage you to pray with your plants, or more specifically, to pray with some seeds. Find some seeds or bulbs and some dirt – it doesn’t matter if it’s a pot or in the ground – and plant the seeds. As you do so, pray about any pain, loss, or grief you might be carrying. Pray about the aspects of your life that you would like to invite God to transform. Put them into the tomb of the earth, and then tend to those seeds. Love them, nurture them. Continue to pray for transformation and healing and grace.

Then, as your seeds change, offer prayers of thanksgiving for the ways that you’re changing. Marvel at the differences. Acknowledge that there’s so much going on that you can’t see. Offer praise for new life. And, if you’re lucky enough that your prayer seeds bear fruit, don’t hoard the seeds. Practice Acts 4, practice a resurrection

spirituality, by sharing their grace. In so doing, you will be allowing your tomb to become transformed into a compost bin.

Continued blessed Easter, friends! Alleluia, and amen!

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