

Sermon: Whose Garden is This? (by Stephen Bartlett)
Crescent Hill Presbyterian Church
October 16, 2009

Faithful Worshippers, Today, October 16th, is World Food Day. With 1/6 of humanity now suffering chronic hunger in a world glutted by surplus grain, today we as followers of Jesus Christ seek to understand how this human suffering can be combated. As you came in to worship, you were each given an envelope with some seeds, and I will ask you as you approach the Lord's meal later to share them, or according to what is written on the envelope, to "liberate" them back into the baskets labeled "Common Goods of Nature" or "Abundance of God". (If you want to try them in next year's garden, we will share larger quantities after worship...from the baskets.) This will be a symbolic sharing and liberation, affirming our belief that seeds, like water, air, land, biodiversity... can never be turned into "things" "commodified" that is monopolized, or as we say "Privatized", or as some quip: "Profitized," Living things such as seeds must always be considered a common good of nature, as farmers have practiced for millennia since the inception of agriculture, sharing them freely with each other.

To that end, when I say La Semilla Es, can you respond: La Vida! Let's try that: La Semilla Es... La Vida! La Semilla Es.... La Vida! ... Gracias. Keep alert, friends, as I will be calling this out again when you might least expect it! As I recount a conversation I have been having over at our community garden, I ask you to consider whether food production and agriculture itself should ever be roped into the narrow logic of markets, ownership, supply and demand, profit margins..., shareholder dividends, dominant market share, commodity futures?... and still honor God's intent for humans and how we are to live on this Earth... This is how the conversation starts...when the ten year old from Field Elementary School asks: "Who owns this garden?" She has a rake in hand to spread some mulch. It is a warm day in May and she is on a walking field trip with her fourth grade class. "No one owns this garden," I reply. "How could someone own all these wild living things? You want to put an earth worm on a leash?" I smile. She purses her lips and smiles back, but she is not satisfied. "I mean, who owns this land?" she insists. "Well," I say, "our church owns the land, technically speaking. But anyone who wants to, can come here and harvest and eat. So you see... nobody really owns it. Or you could say God owns it," I conclude, pulling at some edible weeds called purslane moving in on the lettuce and radishes. "Anybody can come here and eat? Really?" Her face is intense and her eyes wide in question. "Yup, anyone who is hungry or strolling by here can just stop in and eat whatever they want to. Some plums or blueberries...a cucumber or tomato, an apple or watermelon...an ear of corn... whatever... That's why we call it a community garden. It belongs to the community, which means everyone." "Even if they never work here?" she asked. "Even if they never work here," I say. The girl stopped spreading the mulch, deep in thought. Finally, she said, "Cool!" and her dark eyes shone as she smiled, and then ran for the wheelbarrow to get more wood chips to spread with her classmates.

La Semilla es.... La Vida! La Semilla Es... La Vida!

This conversation typically takes place in the John Leake Memorial Garden behind Crescent Hill Presbyterian church, a garden I helped first plant with a couple other church members 13 years ago, now coordinated under the umbrella of an organization called

Sustainable Agriculture of Louisville (SAL). 'Sal' means 'salt' in Spanish. I like to think we are one small but salty and fertile part of a growing movement of urban agriculturalists cultivating urban plots in cities across the U.S. We had our 7th summer gardening camp there this past June, teaching children to garden, food process, cook and swim...telling Coyote stories...and the garden provides food and medicines to the adult volunteers who work there from time to time. More volunteers are always welcome to join our group! La Semilla es...La Vida!!

Friends, today the overall situation for farmers, stewards of the seed, is dire. In the U.S. there are now more inmates in prison than there are farmers!! And this rural exodus is now accelerating across the world as millions of family farmers and indigenous communities vanish from the countryside in search of economic survival, due to unfavorable economic conditions, slanted and predatory policies and resulting bankruptcies. The 49 year Jubilee for the annulment of debts and the return of ancestral lands is long due!! The ironic expression "he bought the farm" to mean he "died" is strangely on the mark. As one response to this disaster in the U.S., urban agriculturalists and local farmers who live near towns and cities are developing rural-urban partnerships and producing food that they are marketing directly, often within new "fair trade" schemes, what we call the "solidarity economy." This year I was fortunate enough to be asked to train and accompany about 40 refugee farm families recently relocated here from Africa and Asia, helping them produce food for themselves and two new farmers' markets on plots on the southside of Louisville. La semilla es... La Vida!

City people are looking for healthy fresh food produced in healthy soils and eating the meat, eggs, milk and cheese from animals raised humanely and wholesomely. The loss of small-scale farmers, in many places called 'peasants' (or 'people of the land'), has happened in many countries as so-called "free trade" that accompanies the industrialization of agricultural practices has impoverished farmers around the world. This happens typically when surplus and cheap foods from Europe and the U.S. are exported and "dumped" on the markets of other countries, sold at prices below the cost of production, which means local farmers go bust. But farmers are organizing more and more. They are fighting back La Semilla es... La Vida!

In September 2003 in Cancun, Mexico as part of peoples' protests against the World Trade Organization or WTO whose affluent representatives were trying to expand and deepen so-called "free" trade in agricultural commodities across the planet, Mr Lee Kyung Hae, a Korean family farm leader, handed out a flier as he and his companions marched here and there striking gongs and carrying a Buddhist-style funeral pyre whose casket was labeled: The WTO Kills Farmers. What I didn't know at the time was that this flier was in effect the last will and testament of Mr. Lee, and that I would as a result of Mr. Lee's dramatic action during the first Via Campesina march, be thrust into an intensive process of organizing with these South Korean farmers, who had interpreters in their delegation who spoke English but not Spanish. I would soon come to play the role of English-Spanish interpreter for these remarkable organizers, as they led the vigils and protests. The flier Lee handed out read as follows: "I am 56 years old, a farmer from South Korea who has strived to solve our problems with the great hope in the ways to organize farmers' unions. But I have mostly failed, as many other farm leaders elsewhere have failed. Soon after the Uruguay Round Agreement was sealed, we Korean farmers realized that our destinies are no longer in our own hands. We cannot seem to do

anything to stop the waves that have destroyed our communities where we have been settled for hundreds of years...Once I went to a house where a farmer abandoned his life by drinking a toxic chemical because of his uncontrollable debts. I could do nothing but listen to the howling of his wife. If you were me, how would you feel?...To make myself brave, I have tried to find the real reason and the force behind those waves. And I reached the conclusion, here in front of the gates of the WTO (World Trade Organization). I am crying out my words to you, that have for so long boiled in my body. I ask: for whom do you negotiate now? For the people or for yourselves? Stop basing your WTO negotiations on flawed logic and mere diplomatic gestures. Take agriculture out of the WTO system." La semilla is... La Vida!

On Sept 10, 2003 at the barricades set up to keep the protesters away from the WTO meeting, in a large gathering of indigenous peoples and farmers from around the world that I was a part of, Mr. Lee stunned us and the world and immolated himself with his pocket knife, an act that in East Asian cultures, we would later learn or try to understand, had deep significance as a potent form of social protest. Mr. Lee's dramatic and tragic death there in Cancun at the barricades of the WTO made front page newspaper headlines across most of the world, except, can you guess?, in the United States.. Partly as a result of his act, four days later and after several more powerful vigils and protests by tens of thousands on the Cancun peninsula led by none other than the courageous Korean protesters, representatives of the Global South countries walked out of the talks leading to the collapse of the WTO negotiations in Cancun, a powerful victory for the family farm movement. The WTO had been stopped from opening all the world's markets to corporate surpluses, and remains blocked from achieving this agenda to this day. La Semilla es... La Vida!

Why, you might wonder, has economic globalization and agricultural industrialization led to extreme rural impoverishment and hunger? Why are 80 percent of the hungry people in the world rural? Don't rural poor people have better access to food than the urban poor? The answer is, "No, they don't." This answer has to do with the question that girl in the garden in Louisville was struggling with and the unfulfilled mandate of Jubilee. In contrast to the sharing represented by that community garden where anyone can come and harvest, in many parts of the world land, water and even living seeds have come to be the private property of rich individuals and transnational corporations. In Mexico the North American Free Trade Agreement forced Mexico to do away with collective land arrangements known as 'ejidos' one of the main guarantees won in the Mexican revolution of 1910. That threat of privatization of indigenous and peasant lands provoked the rise of the Zapatista movement in Chiapas. In Brazil, as in the U.S., millions have gone bankrupt, creating massive shantytowns surrounding vast cities. The MST or Landless Rural Workers Movement has been working courageously to reverse that rural exodus by pushing the government to fulfill promises of agrarian reform. La Semilla es... La Vida.

But the sinful economic model of oppression continues to deepen. All over the world, collective or shared land holdings formerly common in many places have been outlawed and broken up by the buying up of individual land titles given to families or by driving people from the land through violence or threats of violence, whether they have land titles or not. To make matters worse, the surplus production of many small-scale farmers once sold locally cannot compete with the cheap imported products, so those growers too

are getting cash-poor and hungry in the dry season and leaving the countryside. Mr. Lee's farm community in Korea suffered this fate. Friends, this is a grave matter of life and death, an explosive matter of injustice. When the price of foods shot up last year, the number of hungry people in the world exploded to over 1 billion. The staple foods of corn, wheat, and rice almost doubled in price, but this was not because of any global shortage, since 2008 had a record grain harvest worldwide, The true cause of the sudden price rises was this absurdity!: in a new climate of financial deregulation of capital flows (we have heard too much about since the collapse of US high finance) Wall St. investors and speculators and even pension fund managers were making expensive bets that the prices for food, and oil, would go up in the future, buying what are called "commodity futures." The big bets themselves drove up the prices of those foods and oil, creating a perfect storm of price volatility. Some shareholders, hedge fund managers and commodities speculators, not to mention agribusiness companies were making fortunes from the exploding prices, while one billion people were suffering from hunger. Poor people went hungry NOT because of a shortage of food, but because they didn't have enough money to buy the food or enough land to grow their own food, from years of reverse agrarian reform and rural exodus. La Semilla es... La Vida!

So how do we walk on this path toward redeeming justice? For starters, we cannot do it alone. We need the courage to be had from our faith in God, and we need each other as members of a community of faith, trying to walk the path Jesus tread for us. We need to walk shoulder to shoulder with the brothers and sisters of other faith traditions as well. We need everyone with a generous heart to walk with us, and to dig in the earth together as with the community garden here on the seminary grounds. La Semilla es...La Vida.

As we walk forward in that way, we can begin to rebuild our broken local food economy and buy less food each passing year from giant corporations, less seeds, chemicals, fertilizer. When we all have access to nourishing food grown and processed nearby, by farmers or community gardeners, or can find the time for growing some of the food for ourselves, we will all be a lot more secure. We will find we need each other more and community will strengthen. When that happens, when we all have access to land to grow food, and seeds and water, or to relationships of mutuality with local farmers and food processors in sufficient numbers, then economic development will result, employment will expand, and thereby chronic hunger will begin to disappear. It really is as simple and as difficult as that! Not only that, such a localized food economy will also dramatically reduce humanity's carbon footprint and slow or stop global warming. Fertile farmlands and forests are where we have to be storing the surplus CO₂ in the atmosphere, in soil fertility and diverse biomass, restoring healthy ecosystems. Therefore, we say no to the privatization of the goods of nature! No to PROFIT-IZATION. Yes to a living wage. Yes to supporting the people of the land! Praise to the Lord that this is beginning to happen today! Humans can adapt and treat each other with respect!! La Semilla es...La Vida! Seeds hold a special place in this scenario. Seeds are miraculous transmitters of nature's complexity, of the information of life. Seeds are absolutely essential, and their diversity is under threat today by corporate seed monopolies, whose names appear on some of the seed envelopes you have in your hands. Seeds also represent the collective efforts and husbandry of many hundreds of generations of farmers across the planet, selecting seeds, cross-breeding seeds, intercropping seeds, saving and sharing seeds, migrating with seeds.

The Paraguayan bean seeds you are holding I traded in informal exchange for some Ohio Valley Old Hickory White Corn, on a visit to Asuncion, Paraguay. The day they raise their heads upon germinating out of the soil, those seeds have the marvelous characteristic of actually tracking the sun across the heavens, like a sunflower. La Semilla es...La Vida!

The amount of human observation and trial and error over millennia compressed into each seed used in our crops today staggers the imagination. Seeds also represent an essential component of what economists call the “means of production”. Just as land is being stripped of its social function and privatized, in order to exclude some from access, in service of the profit motive, in the same way seeds are being privatized! And we are not just talking about quantities of seed being owned by companies and individuals. We ARE talking about entire species and seed varieties being owned in their entirety, by means of patents, or so-called ‘intellectual property.’ But whose intelligence is being claimed as private property? Can we patent a pine forest? Can we patent the sun? If someone can claim to have modified the sun, giving it a new spot perhaps, they will apply to own the sun and can be granted a patent. When the US Supreme Court in the 90s ruled that living things could be patented, this opened a dangerous floodgate for the wholesale takeover of the means of production by corporations, enabling them to expand and concentrate their market share and economic power. Monsanto, the biggest of the seed giants, now owns 80% of the seeds traded on the world market today. But friends, La Semilla es...?

Via Campesina, or the Peasant Way, is the name of a worldwide farmers movement, now active in more than 90 countries, including the US, representing the needs and enjoying the power and solidarity of hundreds of millions of people literally in love with the Earth. True farmers are crazy lovers of their land and all its creatures! Out of this love, when Via Campesina mobilizes to defend a just food system, Via Campesina can mobilize tens or hundreds of thousands of people, as they have done in Brazil, in Mexico, in India, in Rome, in Hong Kong, in France and Japan, in Indonesia, in Guatemala, in Colombia, in Nicaragua, and in Honduras. As a member of the Community Farm Alliance, part of the National Family Farm Coalition, I am a member of the Via Campesina, as are some of you, if you are CFA members. Via Campesina promotes the concept of Food Sovereignty. Like the concept of God’s Sovereignty upon the land...”The earth is the Lords’ and the Fullness Therein...”, food sovereignty implies the free sharing and protection of the common goods of nature, and the defense of local food markets when they are threatened by a system of exclusion and monopoly domination. Mr. Lee Kyung Hae who was a member of the Via Campesina from South Korea, is considered a martyr of that struggle for Food Sovereignty. We have heard the powerful testimony of his daughter at the Via Campesina Congress in Mozambique last year asking us to they continue the struggle for which her father gave up his life. La Semilla es...La Vida...

For the peasant farmers of Via Campesina, as with the Old and New Testaments, the common goods of nature should never be taken as private property for the purpose of exclusion and concentration, whether it be land, water or the seeds of biodiversity. For peasants, as for the prophets of Christianity, the abundant goods provided by God must be shared, and no one should be excluded... all should have access to a living wage, especially the farm laborers...and not based only on a particular hourly wage fixed by employers...but based on what they need to live... as the verses of Mathew 20 so well

proclaim, for the vineyard is God's, the vineyard is God's!! Humans cannot create earth, or water, or crops but only steward them to fruit, and the life in soil cannot be created by humans, but only revered and gently protected to maintain the health of that complex life created by a mysterious God still alive in the dynamism around us. Humans cannot invent a seed, cannot duplicate the harmony of ecosystems through selecting characteristics and engineering them into living things. We cannot! And if we think we can, we should not! That, my friends, is the work of God, as nature evolves, and as humble farmers share their nourishing seeds freely, and plant and share the best. Seeds are Holy because they are from God. The seeds you sow and reap, like your own bodies, are holy and sacred, living temples of God. La Semilla is... La Vida!

So as you come forward today to partake of the nourishing elements of the spiritual food our Lord Jesus prepares for us, I invite you to share of the seeds you have in your envelopes by pouring them out into the common baskets, and for those with envelopes that proclaim the seeds to be private property, I invite you to symbolically liberate those seeds into the baskets representing the Shared Abundance of God, the Common Goods of Nature. The power of God's life is within us and the living world around us, a wonderful gift of God that no one can limit and own. Life bursts forth in the way God intended! Praise to the Holy One!! La Semilla es...La Vida! And let all the people say... Amen! Amen!

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