**The Garden of God: Busting Sod**

**Luke 5:1-11 by Patty Friesen**

We’ve been doing a gardening theme in Osler this summer because we’re starting a community garden there – either on the schoolyard or behind Floating Gardens Greenhouse. It’s an exciting venture because as Mennonites in the valley, we are good at growing things and it joins the community’s need for food. But any new community garden begins with breaking ground or busting sod as we said where I grew up.

I grew up in northern Alberta, in the Peace River country where farmers were still homesteading 30 years ago. This meant they bought a quarter of land full of boreal forest or “bush” from the Alberta government for something like $1/acre and committed to live on that quarter for a number of years. They left the comforts of established farms and easy access to town to live in isolation, off grid roads. We had homesteaders in our congregation at Bluesky Mennonite Church, brave souls who were investing large loans in tearing down scrub brush with caterpillars, pushing it into long windrows and burning it for weeks, then painstakingly picking rocks and finally disking in the windrow ash and finally planting. It was tough going.

Homesteaders were risk-takers, hard-workers and were often poor and relied on nature to feed them, moose and bear and deer. We town dwellers sometimes called homesteaders “bushed” – meaning they looked or acted differently than townsfolk, but we had to respect them for their initiative in an inhospitable environment. Our local softball team was called the Sod Busters in honour of homesteaders.

Jesus called disciples who were kind of bushed themselves or fished – poor, subsistence fishermen who relied on nature to feed them. It’s these kind of folks whom Jesus called as disciples, called them away from what they knew how to do – fishing into something they didn’t know how to do – feeding and healing people. It was groundbreaking work – breaking up something that was already established for something entirely new. They were the most unlikely candidates to be risk-takers, taking their Jewish religion on a new path following a teacher who called himself the Son of God. It was extremely risky business – life-threatening in fact. They were breaking sod, tearing up the old order of law-based religion with its hierarchy of priests and religious authorities for a new soil of grace and egalitarianism.

Today’s miraculous catch of fish and Peter’s call to leave everything and catch people in Luke 5 is the parallel story to Saul’s miraculous encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus in Acts 9. Both Peter and Paul were called dramatically, through a miraculous event, while they were in the midst of their routine activities, and both were given a commission to devote themselves to bringing others to Jesus. The miraculous catch of fish reminds us that Jesus’s mighty works are not unlike the works of Moses, Elijah and Elisha where God provided manna, oil and barley bread to feed the people. Jesus provided an abundance of fish. The work of God’s kingdom will be accompanied by signs of God’s gracious love. It will inaugurate a time of abundance and blessing.

The call of the disciples teaches us several things about Jesus. First of all, the fishermen had done nothing to warrant or merit Jesus’ call. Regardless of what he may have seen in the fishermen, to contest that he called the most capable or most qualified to be his disciples would contradict an important element in the Gospel story. The fishermen were not called because of their qualifications, character or potential but precisely called because of their lack of it. God’s call is as unpredictable as it is unmerited. Second, the call to discipleship did not come in a holy place, the temple or a synagogue but in the midst of the fishermen’s daily work. The point is that God is not limited to the official holy places like church but actually calls people in every area of our lives – our homes, our farms, our workplaces. Thirdly, Jesus commissions the fishermen to call others in the same way that they were called – outside the walls of the holy places, to meet people in their workplaces and homes, yards and gardens and to invite them to this new way of living. It was as grassroots (pun intended) as a movement could be, a groundbreaking movement with the most unlikely instruments of change.

What sod-busting work is God doing these days? When Willard Metzger, president of Mennonite Church Canada was here a few months ago at MC Sask Annual Delegate Session in Osler, he talked about MC Canada breaking up, the spade of change that is turning over traditional Mennonite values and ways of doing national church structures. Over lunch at the Osler Café with Patrick and I, Willard wryly thanked Nutana Park and Osler Mennonite for breaking up MC Canada. When Patrick and I apologized about that, he laughed and said, gay marriage was coming to the Mennonite Church anyhow and there have been several weddings in Mennonite churches in Manitoba and Ontario since. While he couldn’t have predicted how change would bust up the old church structure sod, he believed the Holy Spirit was at work.

Willard then wanted to know how the Holy Spirit was at work at Osler and Nutana in the past year and a half. I told him we had 10 new members in 10 months – 10 for 10 and that over half of our new members didn’t have Mennonite last names and that we were hiring a young pastor named Terri Lynn Paulson, from some kind of Icelandic Lutheran ethnicity who grew up in the United Church and came to the Mennonite Church because she saw a composter in the kitchen at Nutana Park. Patrick told him Nutana has had 17 new members in the past year and 9 baptisms of young adults who have joined the church because of Matt and Craig’s wedding – a groundbreaking movement with unexpected instruments of change.

Through the Holy Spirit, young adults are being baptized and busting sod in the Mennonite Church, wrestling with current issues from the perspective of our spiritual roots. Never before in recent history have we needed a renewed mooring in our own core beliefs to keep the ship afloat during the rough sailing that lies ahead for us as MC Canada determined last week in their assembly. While structures are important, our identity as a distinctive Anabaptist-Mennonite faith community is primary as followers of Jesus. Jesus gives shape and form to all aspects of our faith expression. Jesus is a voice to all our worship, teaching, preaching and a guidepost for our children and developing young adults. We have fertile Anabaptist soil to raise children and new converts but it gets a little crusted over sometimes and needs disking.

Sometimes we may be a little root-bound, a little full of rocks, a little set in our ways, a little unforgiving, a little stubborn. I hate change but I believe change is the spade or the disk that changes things up in my personal life. Whether I want it or not, change descends upon me through family circumstances, work, church, health. Something happens to painfully turn me over, expose me and reposition me. Whatever I was trying to hold onto, financial security, relationship security, some sense of a predictable future, gets dug up and turned over.

For example, I never expected to live in Saskatchewan. Saskatchewan was what we drove through from northern Alberta to get to family reunions in southern Manitoba. I had lived in exciting cities like Edmonton and Portland, Oregon. Patrick and I enjoyed a decade of exciting urban ministry in Minneapolis. We had just bought a house in Minneapolis and renovated it and were putting down roots when the spade of conflict and burnout dug deep into my work life and turned it over. It was what Dr. Brene Brown calls falling flat on our faces in her book Rising Strong. It was a painful, heart-breaking process to uproot and move to Saskatoon. It took our ministries in completely different directions – Patrick at Nutana Park Mennonite Church and me in chaplaincy at the Rosthern Mennonite Nursing Home and now at Osler Mennonite. We have been here now as long as we were in Minneapolis and now we can say the spade of change, and the midlife sod busting was good for us. I thought I was done with sod busting, that I had established the perfect garden soil of humility in my heart but it seems like the Holy Spirit continually likes busting sod. Let us trust the Spirit’s work in our lives and in our local and national church and let us pray.

You are the gardener, O God, the breaker of sod and we are the soil. Make of us new earth. Cultivate the dry, hard patches, rain your grace upon us and shine your love. Make new shoots of faithfulness germinate within us, budding sprouts of goodness and kindness, patience and generosity. We hear your promise that a tree of life will rise up within us and the leaves will not wither in hear, nor dry up in times of drought. The fruits of the Spirit will ripen and hang heavy, a harvest of love and joy to feed ourselves, and all around us. Amen.