

Fostering Life God's Way

by Lena Van Wyk

At the farm, we are looking ahead to what will be our fourth growing season on our shared land! This is astounding, as we look back to 2017 and think of how much our cultivated land has changed. We started out our first year with under 1/8th acre of garden beds and ran our small first year of CSA (Church Supported Agriculture) Program on just a small piece of land. Every year, we've added more land. We've scraped up gravel, added compost, dug out pathways, prepared the soil, and put a lot of sweat equity into growing our farm. We now have 1/2 acre of land under permanent raised beds, including two 100-foot, plastic-covered tunnels where we grow all year round.

This growing season, we've decided to take a break from expansion and focus on deepening our engagement with our current land. God teaches us that there is a season for everything. In Genesis, we are told that he expanded Creation with passion for six days, but then took the seventh day to rest and enjoy what He had created. The only thing that grows without stopping in Creation is cancer. Every other part of Creation has inbuilt rhythms of growth and rest. A perennial plant puts all its energy into photosynthesis and growth in the summer, but then switches focus in the winter time to strengthening its roots and letting its foliage die back. Without this focus on deep-rootedness, the plant would not have the strong underground systems that provide nourishment, water, and immunity that foster the summer's growth. God builds wisdom into the very fabric of his Creation.

We have been reflecting on this a lot at the farm, asking the Holy Spirit to show us how to establish these rhythms of growth and

rest into our ministry. We

are looking forward to a year where we focus on building stronger soil ecosystems in our current land, strengthening the vitality of the soil itself so that future crops can grow with vigor. We do this by not tilling the land after it's been established and focusing on inoculating the soil with the bacteria, fungi, protozoa, and archaea that make soils really thrive.

Tillage, a common practice, breaks up these soil communities and causes great destruction, leaving plants more vulnerable to disease and more dependent on synthetic fertilizers. If you think of it, breaking up the soil is a rare occurrence in wild ecosystems. Soils in forests, prairies, and wetlands are instead layered year after year with mulches from dying plants and become richer and richer over time. Humans invented tillage because it makes the upfront work of planting easier, but it also encourages weeds, causes plant disease and ultimately makes our job as farmers much harder. There's a spiritual lesson in this. What are the things we do as humans that seem to be shortcuts but end up making our lives so much more difficult? Christians have a word for this attempt to live outside God's laws of Creation for our own ease or seeming benefit: we call it sin. Sin doesn't have to be blatantly evil. It can often creep into our lives unnoticed as something we perceive as harmless or even pragmatic. But if it brings more death than life to us and to the world, it is not in the living stream of the Holy Spirit.





But to farm without tillage takes a focused and intentional farming practice that requires diligence. We have to make sure we spread lots of leaf and wood chip mulch, which contain and foster all those great microorganisms, and discourage weed growth. In the first few seasons, before a healthy soil texture forms, we have to go through each bed with a tool called a broadfork to break up compaction. We have to make compost teas that brew the biology we want and spread them on the soil. It takes work to foster life! There's a spiritual lesson in this as well. The work of ministry that we are all called to as members of God's Kingdom takes a lot of intentional work! Certainly we do this work in the power of the Holy Spirit, but it still takes a lot of intentional planning, thoughtfulness, and care. We have to take the time to learn what fosters life in our communities. We have to learn what kind of activities, practices, and postures foster a rich and faithful church community.

The fruit of these efforts on the farm is sweeter carrots, increased tomato yields, hardier kale plants that are more resistant to pests. Ultimately, when you do this work to intentionally farm with Cre-

ation rather than against her, she starts to work more and more for you as well. She provides the beneficial insects to eat the ones that munch on your vegetables. She provides the soil microbes that break down the nutrients in the soil and feed your plants' roots. She collects water in the spongy, decaying organic matter in your pathways that helps your plants get through drought. She attracts the pollinators that pollinate your plants and give you higher yields. God has designed, and keeps designing, a remarkably resilient earth that is miraculously skilled at fostering life. When we encounter the common problems in agriculture (pests, disease, drought, and bad harvests) we should be asking: are we farming God's way?

What are the ways you have noticed that the Holy Spirit makes things flow in your life when you lean into God's ways? What has started to fall into place when you are faithful? What miracles have occurred when you pray? What life has the Holy One been fostering in your life? Name these things and relish in the fruit you have been gifted with.

