# A Time to Grow

*Lenten Lessons*
*from the Garden to the Table*

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# Introduction

The inspiration for this Lenten resource comes from two of my greatest passions, faith and food—particularly, the growing and tending of my own food. When I am in the garden with my hands in the earth, I feel deeply connected to creation, and thereby more connected to God, our Creator. Through stories of gardening and food, I hope to invite you into that space where you also may grow more connected to God. Whether you are a Master Gardener or struggle to keep houseplants alive, we are all united in our need for sustenance; we all need food.

And at the heart of every human celebration, we find food. It is the common thread of the human experience. Nations, religious traditions, even individual family units all share their own special set of uniting rituals—and a majority of these take place, in some manner, around the idea that food and bounty ought to be shared. Whether it is breaking the Ramadan fast, enjoying a wedding feast, surrounding a grill on the Fourth of July, participating in the Eucharist, gathering together for Passover, or even participating in the simple tradition of cake and ice cream at a birthday party, our celebrations and the foods we consume at them are deeply intertwined.

However, due to agricultural industrialization and mass urbanization, many of the connections to the creation of our food have been lost in the short span of one or two generations. A few years ago, I was picking strawberries at a pick-your-own strawberry patch near our home. (We grow enough strawberries in our garden to eat, but not enough for making jam or doing any serious canning.) I was sent to a row near a couple in their mid-thirties who had brought their kids to the patch, and they were discussing strawberry harvesting. The young father began asking the farm's owner about strawberries.

"How are strawberries harvested in bigger operations?" the young man asked.

A little baffled, the owner responded, "The same way you just harvested them."

"Wait. You mean someone has to pick every strawberry I see in the grocery store?"

"Pretty much," the older farmer replied.

There are pictures of me picking strawberries in my grandfather's garden that predate my earliest memories, and I remember helping my family harvest corn, green beans, tomatoes, and more. For a long time, I took for granted the knowledge that those experiences also provided. But many people in my generation, and the generations that follow, have not shared this experience. They have seen combines harvesting things like feed corn and wheat, so they do not know that machines are not capable of harvesting most of the produce we consume.

Many of my clergy colleagues, raised in cities and suburbs, also tend to lack this experience—despite the fact that many of us end up serving older, rural congregations of people who were raised on farms or make their living in agriculture. Exploring where our food comes from has the potential to unite disparate generations whose experiences are vastly different from one another. I have yet to meet a person raised on a farm who does not eagerly share barnyard stories from his or her childhood, and these stories tend to delight even the most ardent city dwellers. I have yet to encounter a young child who does not eagerly dive into the earth when given the chance to plant or explore.

I was concerned when I was sent to my first rural appointment. Raised in the suburbs of Kansas City, I knew that nothing in my time as an associate pastor at an urban and (extremely) liberal church had prepared me for the experience. Little about my chaplaincy experiences in a downtown Kansas City hospital matched the reality of my congregants. Nothing about my four years working with college students prepared me for the rural, aging, small church. I had spent the past four years staying as current as possible on pop culture, a job requirement when working with college students. My new congregation was openly skeptical of my education, my age, my vocabulary, my gender, and even my attire. My decision to wear dress pants one Easter was based on the sleet pouring down outside; it never occurred to me that a woman in pants on Easter would be considered scandalous in the twenty-first century.

They liked hunting; I have shot a gun once in my life, and it was a BB gun. They had trucks for farming; I had a fuel-efficient Honda Civic to save money on my long commute. They had lived in the same community their entire lives; I had lived in seven different communities just in the last ten years. They liked the privacy of country living; in my entire life, I had never lived more than a five-minute drive from a grocery store. They considered a good vacation to be going to see their grandchildren; I considered a good vacation traveling halfway around the world to scuba dive four or five times a day. Many of them believed no good movies had been made since John Wayne died, but he died before most of my favorite movies had even been created: *Harry Potter*, *The Hunger Games*, *Star Wars*, you name it. (I have still never seen a John Wayne movie.) Some of them had great-great-great grandchildren; married but childless, I had just turned thirty.

How on earth was I going to connect with these people?

I mean, there's always Jesus. But what about sermon illustrations? What about small talk? Then I found it. I found what we had in common. A childhood spent harvesting produce in my maternal grandfather's garden and visiting my paternal grandparent's dairy farm had instilled in me a connection to the earth that went beyond a general love of food.

It seemed like a small start, but it was a beginning. We started swapping recipes, discussing creative solutions for the overabundance created by a single zucchini plant. We began sharing gardening successes and failures, and I remember the look of surprise on one woman's face when I offered up a solution to her dilemma of blossom-end rot on her tomatoes. After I built a chicken coop in our suburban backyard, we began trading crazy chicken stories. In a group of people with whom I had little else in common, I had found my "in."

The authenticity of these connections mattered and was not something I could have faked my way through, mostly because a conversation about manure and composting practices is an admittedly difficult topic to discuss with feigned passion. Having lived a suburban existence for much of my life, I found that these conversations also helped connect me to my roots, both figuratively and literally.

In the modern United States, we live in a world of fast food and to-go meals, where many people have forgotten the fundamentals of where food comes from. Within this culture, we have lost one of the uniting factors of what makes us human: the simple act of breaking bread together. Journeying through the season of Lent with this in mind, we can slow down, move through the painstaking process of growth, and end together with great feasting and celebration of the resurrection on Easter morning.

While growing or preparing food may not be at the heart of each of the Scripture passages in this study, you will quickly see how each story tells who we are as a Christian people. In the same way, our favorite foods—the ones we really and truly love—tell a story about who we are as well. I hesitate to use the cliché, but “we are what we eat.”

Even in urban areas, popular culture has once again begun to recognize the value of reconnecting to our food and its origins. Millennials who consider themselves “foodies” shop at farmers markets, pay more to “buy local,” and frequent restaurants that advertise themselves as “farm to table.” Part of this is my generation’s desire to make the world a little better—the recognition that how our food is produced and shipped can have massive impacts on our environment and is a matter of social justice for fellow human beings. But I think part of the appeal comes from a deeper desire to put down our screens and simply be together over food that is as good for our bodies as it is for our souls.

Whether your church is in the city center or in the heart of farm country, I believe you will find a way to connect with this Lenten experience. After all, we all eat. There are infinite factors contributing to what we eat and how it is prepared: culture, geography, nationality, religion, socioeconomic status, tastes, and food allergies or aversions. The way we eat varies: seated around a table, positioned behind the wheel while sitting in traffic, walking down a street, perched on tall barstools at a counter, or rushing between meetings or while chasing a toddler. Our bodies require sustenance. The incarnation of Christ teaches us that our bodies matter to our Creator. God cares that we are embodied.

This resource includes reflections and a study guide for small groups to use during the season of Lent, or by individuals during their own private Lenten journey. The sections are divided by the Holy Days in Lent, which include Ash Wednesday, Maundy Thursday, and Good Friday in addition to each Sunday of the season. There are discussion questions at the end of each section. While it is unlikely small groups will have a meeting for every Holy Day during Lent (especially as there are three in Holy Week alone), these questions can still be used for personal reflection and be discussed the next time the group meets for conversation. Each section also includes brief daily devotionals for each of the forty days during the Lenten season, placed between each longer reflection. A few of the daily devotions are poems. Contemplate these during your devotional times on those days. If poetry just isn't your thing, consider how you could rewrite the day's poem to turn it into your own personal prayer for the day.

If you are using this resource with a small group, consider these options for enhancing your experience of this study together:

- Invite a local farmer to come to your group and discuss why local farming matters. If you don't know any farmers in your area, contact a local CSA (community supported agriculture) or a local farmers market organizer. They will put you in contact with a farmer who would love to speak to your group.
- Take turns preparing and hosting a meal for the group each week.
- Make each gathering a potluck. Have each group member bring a dish with a special story, and ask them to share the stories (and maybe even the recipes) over the food at the beginning of your time together.
- Meet one week in a group member's garden. If there are no gardeners in your group, ask around your church.
- Find a local farmers market to attend as a group. Consider creating a meal together with the items you find there.
- Ask a local farmer if the group can meet at their farm one week. If the farmer is willing, ask the farmer to give you a brief tour and explain how the farm operates.

Preachers and worship leaders can use these readings and the accompanying questions to inspire their sermon preparation for a worship series that brings the whole congregation into the experience of *A Time to Grow*. Worship series materials in the back of this book include liturgy with communal responses, altar art ideas for decorating worship space, prompts for children's time in worship, and a communal spiritual practice for the entire congregation during the season of Lent. All references to Scripture use the New Revised Standard Version of the text and are drawn from the assigned Lenten readings across years A, B, and C of the Revised Common Lectionary.

We begin with dirt on Ash Wednesday, exploring the very soil from which we have come and to which we will return. The theme for each week will guide us through the elements of the garden: soil, order, life, water, light, restoration, time, remember, fast, and feast. We will journey through the intricacies of how faith is required to produce food and how that faith can lead us all to feast at the table on Easter morning. The art of growing and preparing food is more than simple sustenance; it is an opportunity to come together in community and share in abundance. Consider this your personal invitation on a journey from seed to table—your invitation to pull up a chair at God's heavenly feast.

# Ash Wednesday

## SOIL

Joel 2:1–2, 12–17; Matthew 6:1–6, 16–21

Blow the trumpet in Zion;
    sound the alarm on my holy mountain!
Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble,
    for the day of the LORD is coming, it is near—
a day of darkness and gloom,
    a day of clouds and thick darkness!
. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
Yet even now, says the LORD,
    return to me with all your heart,
with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning;
    rend your hearts and not your clothing.
Return to the LORD, your God,
    for he is gracious and merciful,
slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love,
    and relents from punishing.

Joel 2:1–2a, 12–13

"Whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

"Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither

> moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."
>
> Matthew 6:16–21

## Cultivating Soil

As any gardener or farmer can tell you, the most important part of growing anything is starting with the right soil. The devoted grower can give a seedling the perfect conditions of water and light, but if the soil is bad, nothing will grow. To the outsider without a microscope, except for a couple of earthworms, a bare patch of soil appears to be dead and lifeless. In a lot of ways, this is true. Soil is largely comprised of decomposed matter from formerly living things. However, the best soil also teems with life (microbes, good bacteria, worms, etc.). What appears dead is a living thing.

In most places, the cultivation of good soil requires a great deal of care and attention. There are a few exceptions to this rule, but for the most part, healthy soil doesn't just happen—it requires work. Earth needs to be properly turned over or tilled, the right nutrients need to be added, and crops need to be rotated. Sometimes soil even needs a season of rest to restore and replenish—farmers refer to this as letting a field "lie fallow."

Industrialized agriculture has led to mass soil depletion across the United States.[1] In order to continue producing plants on this depleted soil, mass agriculture must add large amounts of chemical fertilizer (which is not conducive to human health or the health of our planet). Simultaneously, vast quantities of animal manure are washed into our watersheds every day. This is both a waste and an environmental tragedy; my favorite fertilizer in my garden is the manure produced by my chickens.

My husband and I recently moved, and while we were excited about our new house and land, we were sad to leave behind our peach tree, blueberry bushes, blackberry vines, and strawberry patch. However, our real grief stemmed from leaving behind the soil in our garden. We had worked hard for ten years to create the perfect growing environment in our raised garden beds—composting, adding chicken manure, turning things over by hand, and cultivating the perfect environment for worms. The soil in those garden beds was the result of years of hard work, using techniques that modern technology might lead us to forget.

I observed one such method for fortifying soil when visiting my grandparents, long before I understood what I was witnessing. My grandparents didn't have a garbage disposal. For a long time growing up, I thought the bowl sitting next to their sink to collect food waste (peels, inedible portions of fruit and vegetables, eggshells, etc.) was simply a way to reduce the amount of trash that had to go to the curb. When I was growing up, all of that stuff went down the garbage disposal at our house. While I understood that the bowl at my grandparent's house was emptied onto a compost pile, I didn't understand that this was one way my grandfather improved his garden. I didn't understand that all the "waste" was being recycled back into the ground. I also didn't know, until much later in life, that every few years he would clean out a friend's horse barn and then work those massive amounts of horse manure into the soil of his garden, thereby fortifying it for yet another few seasons. And so, in a tradition that skipped a generation, my husband and I have been composting at our house for quite some time now. The addition of chickens to our home stepped up our composting—they produce excellent fertilizer. The results speak for themselves; each summer and fall we reap another bountiful harvest.

Composting at home or in our churches significantly cuts down on what goes into our landfills. When food is deposited in landfills, it does not receive enough oxygen to break down in the same way it will in a compost pile, and it produces massive amounts of methane, a greenhouse gas. Composting can help cut down on a family or a community's carbon footprint.[2]

I went through a period of incredible spiritual darkness a few years ago. One day my spiritual director asked me if I could think of an image for what I had learned through that dark time. My response? "Chicken shit." She looked a little taken aback. I assured her, "That's the image—chicken shit." My chickens produce a lot of waste. Every few weeks I remove their waste and place it on the compost pile. If I place it directly on the garden, it will kill everything right away. But if I remove all that manure, let it rest for six months, and then apply it to the garden, I likely won't have to put fertilizer on that patch of garden for the rest of the year.

The spiritual lesson I was sharing with my spiritual director was this: Beautiful and bountiful produce grows, quite literally, out of shit. Through God's grace, beautiful and bountiful things can grow out of life's most horrible moments, even the moments that are absolute shit. Sometimes those moments can turn into the most beautiful spiritual fertilizer we can imagine. As the chorus of Lisa and Michael Gungor's song "Beautiful Things" expresses, "You make beautiful things out of dust, you make beautiful things out of us."[3]

We have become detached from the natural order of the world. We place chemicals we can't even pronounce on our plants to make them grow while we shun the most basic designs in nature. Livestock create, as natural by-products, some of the best fertilizer available. Many talented gardeners I know who garden in the city still get cow patties (lumps of dry cow manure) from their friends in the country and steep the cow patties in water. It goes by different names (my husband's grandmother calls it "manure tea"), but these excellent gardeners water their garden with the liquid produced from this combination. Raised in the suburbs—I'm a "city girl" through and through—I would have once turned up my nose at cleaning up after my chickens. I loved the idea of keeping chickens in my backyard, but I was hesitant about the prospect of shoveling all that manure. When I realized that chickens produce gardening gold (in addition to their nutritious eggs), it completely changed my attitude.

## Barren Soil

At our old house there was a patch of bare earth in the backyard for almost eight years. Despite my husband's tireless administrations, we never successfully grew any grass in that back corner by the fence. Since we don't know the entire history of that little piece of land, there are a million things that could have been wrong with the soil back there. One spring I had an idea. I went out with a shovel and turned over the entire corner of the yard where nothing would grow, and then I flung handfuls of wildflower seeds across the entire area. We figured that nothing else had grown back there; we didn't have anything left to lose. Much to our surprise, the wildflowers took root, and that back corner of our yard was the most beautiful part of our garden that summer.

Sometimes our lives feel a lot like that soil: a barren patch void of life, where nothing good will grow. We have all felt that way at one time or another. This is part of the cycle of the human experience.

On Ash Wednesday we are called upon to lay bare our souls. We are called to recognize the stark reality of human existence: “From dust you have come, and to dust you shall return.” Not only do we repent of our sins and cry out to God in anguish, but we mark religiously that we are made of dust and that one day our very bodies will return to the soil from which they have come.

Every year, I offer ashes at the back of the sanctuary or worship space with the traditional language, “From dust you have come, and to dust you shall return.” But I also remind the congregation prior to this time that the word “repent” literally means “to turn around.” After they receive ashes at the back of the sanctuary, I invite them literally to turn around and receive the grace of Communion at the front of the church. It is a beautiful way to give people the sense of physically turning around as they are called to spiritually turn around as well.

The prophet Joel is unique among his prophetic counterparts. There are only a few prophets that historians are unable to place based on historical context in their prophecy, and Joel is among those few. The book seems to have been written after the exile, after the people of Judah have returned from Babylon; however, there are not enough clues in the text to give a definitive answer on the time frame. Additionally, while many of his prophetic counterparts emphasize repentance as turning away from evil and toward justice, Joel’s focus on repentance is concerned with turning toward God in worship. Joel calls for the blowing of the trumpets because the day of the Lord is coming near—and in Joel’s prophecy, the coming of the Lord is not a good thing. But Joel warns the people that they may be spared the wrath of God if they turn toward God in communal worship.

The text makes clear that the precipitating event for Joel’s prophecy was an ecological disaster, followed by an economic one (a simple “a + b = c” equation in an agrarian society). A great plague of locusts devastated the harvest, and the land was left in crisis. While some prophets lay a charge against the people of Israel for a specific unfaithfulness that led to their calamities, Joel's prophecies make no such accusation. Instead, the overarching theme of Joel is a call to the people to draw closer to God by gathering together and worshiping as a community.

## Motivations Matter

Joel calls for communal repentance—an idea foreign to many twenty-first-century American Christians. When there is an accusation that something in our culture is racist or sexist, there is always at least one individual too quick to jump up and exclaim, "But I'm not racist" or "I'm not sexist." True, perhaps that person might not be racist or sexist, but that doesn't mean that that same individual might not profit and benefit from societal practices that are racist and sexist.

We encounter this same challenge with Jesus' words for the day. All too often when the Matthew text is read, the hypocrite about whom Jesus speaks immediately becomes the "other." Other people are the hypocrites, not us. Jesus is inviting the hearer to hold up a mirror and see the places where practiced piety is about appearances rather than true holiness. How do we live out our faith for the appearances others see, and how do we live out our faith in authentic and genuine ways? Jesus is not speaking to the "others"; he's speaking to the "good people." (The Pharisees, though often maligned by modern Christians, certainly thought of themselves as "good people," as did their contemporaries.) Jesus is saying that living life so that others will see us as "good people" is not enough, that motivations matter.

The Communion service that accompanies this book, heavily adapted from The United Methodist Church's Service of Word and Table, has some difficult moments of repentance. It acknowledges that we are participants in corporate sin. The food on our tables often makes us guilty participants in this corporate sin. From the sin of food deserts in our inner cities, to minimum wage workers being unable to afford fresh produce and healthier food, to the mistreatment of migrant workers who harvest vast quantities of the produce we consume, to the ways in which agricultural practices destroy both the environment and the financial well-being of the farmers who are just trying to get by, we are all called to repent of our complicity in a food system wrought with sin. In the "Order" chapter of this book, you will find some suggestions for ways we can change our behavior so that we might, in some ways, remove ourselves from some of these sinful systems. This liturgy might make you and other members of your church uncomfortable. Embrace the discomfort. That is what Ash Wednesday is for—an honest look at ourselves, an honest look at our own sins and hypocrisies, and coming together to take steps toward embracing repentance and wholeness in both the Creator and in God's creation.

From dust we have come, and to dust we will return. But never fear—God makes beautiful things out of dust.

## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. Have you seen God turn manure into something beautiful in your life? What was that experience like?
2. What knowledge did you already have about soil cultivation and health? What did you learn? Did anything surprise you?
3. Does your congregation compost? Why or why not? Do you compost food waste from your own home? Why or why not? How could composting be a spiritual practice for your congregation or family?
4. Have you had moments where your soul has been laid bare? How have those moments shaped you? How have those moments changed you? How has God worked through those times in your life?
5. What does the prophet Joel's call for repentance look like in our era? In what corporate sins do you recognize your complicity? How can we participate in communal repentance in the twenty-first century?
6. What does the practice of Ash Wednesday mean in your spiritual journey?

## DAILY REFLECTIONS

### Thursday

As this series begins, find a windowsill in your home where you can set a small planter. Plant some seeds in potting soil and watch them grow. Consider how God might be calling you to growth during this Lenten season. What changes might God be calling you to make during these forty days? How might you be called to repentance during these forty days? As you tend to your seedling, consider your journey each day.

## Friday

Spend ten minutes today doing some research into how you might compost in your setting. What sort of compost bin would you need in your kitchen, your yard, your apartment? Would composting be a viable option in your home? How can we reduce our impact in landfills, taking better care of God's creation, through the practice of composting? If you have a garden or lawn, how might they benefit from your compost?

## Saturday

Today's devotion is the first poetry devotion. When you encounter the poetry devotions, take time to meditate over them for the day. If poetry isn't your thing, consider how you might rework the themes of that day's poem into your own personal prayer.

*Dust*
From dust I have come,
to dust I will return.
Scientists tell me
most elements in my body
have come from a star.
I am literally stardust.
So, what else can a Creator like that do?