

*A Frog, a Toad, and a Rabbi Walk into a Garden* (Mk. 4.1-9)  
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Some of you will know from reading the newsletter that I had originally intended to use Arnold Lobel's Frog and Toad characters during the time for children. But as the week went on, I couldn't help but tie his characters to our stewardship theme, a matter that I will explain shortly. And as I grow older, I can't help but conflate the worlds of age and experience, blurring the lines as imagination naturally does. I trust that here at Covenant our kids are as philosophical as our grown-ups;<sup>1</sup> and on a good day even the oldest among us can still see with the eyes of a child. With that I give you this morning's meditation on stewardship. It begins with a story:

In Arnold Lobel's celebrated children's book, *Frog and Toad Together*, there are actually a number of stories; they are all worth reading—one is about Toad making a list of things to do on a busy day, one is about Frog and Toad baking more cookies than are necessary and trying desperately thereafter to learn the meaning of willpower, one is about the concept of bravery and involves a lot of running and ends with our protagonists hidden in a closet, and one is about the world of dreams and how they relate to the world we live in. But of all of the stories in the book there is one that is particularly relevant to us this week. In a story entitled "The Garden," Frog and Toad are faced with the daunting challenge of planting seeds and helping them to grow. This is a story that some of you already know, but you also know that it's worth repeating, so I'd like to begin by telling the beginning of the story which will lead us to another story and then, very

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<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of this idea, along with a delightful look at Frog and Toad, see Gareth Matthews, *The Philosophy of Childhood* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994).

quickly, to one more because that's how stories work. But our first story begins, as nearly every Frog and Toad story does, with Frog and Toad greeting each other one fine morning.

"Frog was in his garden," the story begins. "Toad came walking by."<sup>2</sup> And Toad observed that Frog's garden was lovely. In the garden grew great big sunflowers and leafy green vegetables, and Frog stood beneath a trellis draped with curling vines looking quite pleased with his garden. Toad paid him a compliment, to which his friend replied that it had been a lot of work but that he, too, could grow such a garden if he were willing to put in the effort. Toad, being quite interested, accepted a bag of flower seeds from Frog. "Plant [these] in the ground," said Frog, "and soon you will have a garden." "How soon?" asked Toad. "Quite soon," said Frog.

Now for anyone who has not read Frog and Toad for a while, we should note that nine times out of ten Frog is cleverer than Toad. Frog always knows the score, he smiles at his dear friend Toad's foibles and patiently helps him out, and young readers almost always get the sense that Frog is like them because he can see what is happening a mile away just as we can. Only what is also true is that Toad happens also to be a lot like the reader because in him we can see our own silliness, the way we often don't really understand much about what's going on, and how we generally depend on our friends to help us get things right. So let's just say that there is a bit of Frog and Toad in each of us, representing the truth that some days we are clever and others we are just comical. And as Toad goes to his garden with a fresh bag of seeds, what happens first is sheer comedy.

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<sup>2</sup> All Frog and Toad quotes are from "The Garden" in Arnold Lobel, *Frog and Toad Together* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1972).

After digging some rows into the soil, Toad hastily plants his seeds and addresses them. “Now seeds,” he begins, “start growing.” When nothing happens right away, he lowers his head closer to the ground and takes a more emphatic tone. “Now seeds, start growing!” Perplexed by another moment of nothing happening, Toad gets down on all fours and shouts at the seeds, in all capital letters, “NOW SEEDS, START GROWING!” This is the point at which most readers, young or old, begin to giggle because everyone knows that yelling at seeds won’t make them grow. And here we’ll have to speed up the story in the interest of time.

Hearing the commotion, Frog runs down the path and asks Toad why he’s making such a racket. Toad explains that the seeds won’t grow and Frog, with a wink toward the reader, admonishes him. “You are shouting too much. These seeds are afraid to grow...Leave them alone for a few days. Let the sun shine on them, let the rain fall on them. Soon your seeds will start to grow.” Toad takes Frog’s advice, but later in the evening looks out his window and, seeing nothing happening still, begins to worry that he’s really done it. Then, in an effort to make amends with the seeds he believes he has frightened, he goes out into the garden and by candlelight reads them a long, comforting story. The next day he continues in this vein, singing songs to the seeds in the rain; the following day he reads carefully chosen poems to the seeds; the day after that he plays sweet music to the seeds on his violin. Yet with all of the effort nothing seems to be happening and finally Toad slumps at the side of the garden, lays down his violin, and falls into a discouraged sleep. That’s where we’ll leave him for a moment.

In all likelihood, when Rabbi Jesus told his parable of the sower he didn’t mean it as a story for children, though it may be worth noting that this is one of the stories that many

of us remember best from our childhood. It's a story that is easy to recall, a story that appears in all three synoptic gospels, Mark, Matthew, and Luke, and a story that teases our imaginations with certain questions. We have read only the story itself this morning and not the subsequent interpretive section, wherein Jesus is said to have offered a partial explanation. And the reason we have done this is because the parable is so poetic that we might just let it sow its seeds in us for a moment, considering what they might mean for our faith and our church as we consider how we have grown at Covenant and what we still mean to cultivate here. So here is the story, as Jesus told it, and though there is no Frog or Toad in it, as we listen let us listen with both sides of ourselves, the side that knows the score and the side that really doesn't. For there is a serious word here about the hard work that Frog said raising seeds would require. And there may also be a comical affirmation about the ways we, like Toad, try to usher in certain things without ever comprehending the mystery under our noses.

According to Willis Barnstone's eloquent translation, Rabbi Jesus said,

Look, the sower went out to sow  
And it happened that as he sowed  
Some seed fell on the road  
And birds came and ate it.  
Another fell on stony ground  
Where there was little soil,  
And at once it sprang up  
Because it had no deep soil.  
And when the sun rose  
It was burnt, and because  
It had no roots it dried away.  
Another fell among the thorns  
And the thorns came up  
And choked the sprouts  
And it bore no fruit.  
But some fell on good soil  
And it bore fruit, shooting up  
And increasing and it bore

Thirty and sixty and one hundredfold.  
And he said,  
Who has ears to hear, hear.<sup>3</sup>

The parable provides an interesting contrast to the children's story because it focuses not so much on the sower but on the seeds themselves. The seeds grow, in the rabbi's telling, based upon where they fall. The matters of the type of ground the seed fell on, the sunlight to which it was exposed, the proximity of competing plants, and the fertility of the soil are all considered by the parable as it hints poetically that a seed needs a number of things to go right if it is ever to grow to maturity and bear good fruit. And if it is possible to read a Frog and Toad story and see ourselves in both characters, then it is also possible to hear this parable and see ourselves in both sower and seed. On the one hand we might ask, like the sower, where we are scattering our efforts, how we spend our time, money, and energy, and if we are distributing them wisely. And on the other hand we might ask, like the seeds, where in our lives we root and nurture ourselves so that we might grow and flourish. Where do we find that good soil for ourselves and others, and how do we cultivate lives together? Of course, there is more than a hint of ambiguity here. Biblical scholar PHEME PERKINS notes that part of the natural imagery seems to be the loss of certain seeds; the bird eaten and the sun burnt have always been parts of our experience.<sup>4</sup> So even within this simple pastoral parable the problem of suffering can be found below the surface, or at least an ancient and wise acknowledgment that not all is

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<sup>3</sup> Mark 4.1-9 in Willis Barnstone, *The Restored New Testament: A New Translation with Commentary Including the Gnostic Gospels Thomas, Mary, and Judas* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2009).

<sup>4</sup> PHEME PERKINS, "Reflections on Mark 4.1-20" in *The New Interpreter's Bible Vol. VIII*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 574.

certain and there will be loss along the way. Not only will some help be required, but a little bit of good fortune will be needed as well. And this strange affirmation, that we are both to put in a lot of effort and also accept a kind of mystery, which we feel and know but cannot always name, brings us to a final brief story about stewardship.

The final story is, of course, our own. And although it would be fun to keep this meditation only to frogs and toads and rabbis, we gather this morning to begin our annual stewardship campaign. The theme for our campaign this year is “Cultivating Our Covenant,” and we are encouraged to consider the twin question of the garden: How have we grown here? And what do we intend to cultivate in the weeks, months, and years to come? I dare say, in the spirit of Frog and Toad, that many of us have grown in our understanding of the different sides of ourselves, coming to know not only the clever side that presents well in public, but the hapless and foibled side that needs silent confession and friends upon which to lean. More importantly, I might say, in the spirit of Rabbi Jesus, that many of us have grown in our understanding of the radical nature of his call, moving the seeds of ourselves from the shallows where we once lodged to the deeper, richer, and more difficult soil of his liberation theology, creative nonviolence, remembrance of the poor, and disorienting forgiveness. These questions are for each of us to contemplate; they are for us to take up and puzzle with as a child might take up her storybook and laugh at the jokes without need of explanation or turn to his parable and feel the weight of its questions without having all of the answers presented.

I can only say, without a heavy hand or a hard push, what I believe to be true about this community and why my own family has chosen to give as generously as we possibly can. I believe this community is a saving community. It is a safe place where we can

each explore our deepest questions and express our truest selves. It is a garden where we are nurtured and cared for and also challenged to grow, become, and bear fruits with our living that we may not have dreamed possible. It is a collection of characters who tell stories so imaginative that it is not often clear if they are for children or grown-ups. It is a place of extraordinary individuals who value community above all. Put plainly, it takes a lot of time, energy, and money to pull off this group project. But giving these things we find joy in the work and, more often than not, great surprise at the harvest. So you know how the story ends, right?

After having fallen asleep, Toad is awakened by the voice of his friend. “Toad, Toad, wake up,” said Frog. “Look at your garden!” Toad rises to find small green sprouts coming up among the rows. To his astonishment, the seeds have begun to grow, and he reckons that all of his work to quell their fears must have finally paid off. “And now you will have a nice garden too,” said Frog. “Yes,” said Toad, “but you were right, Frog. It was very hard work.” Readers old and young get the joke. Toad believes that his artful efforts saved the day; Frog knows that it was nature’s time and technique. But people of a certain faith might get the deeper joke that they’re both right. For seeds need water, sunlight, rich soil, and time. And perhaps they also need stories, choral music, poems, and instrumentalists. Don’t we all?

The stories hint that perhaps what we need most of all is to not be afraid. So let us not be afraid. Let us simply tend our garden and take joy in the work. Let us dig, plant, water, and wait. Let us sing, dance, read poems, and play music. And let us have faith, small as a seed someone once said, that we can make with the days our own little patch of

beloved community right here on Caroline Street. Frogs, toads, rabbits, and children know it can be so. Then may it be so with us.