

Thoughts from the Garden – September 2020

I recently watched as a caterpillar was being devoured by parasitic wasp larvae. It looked like a caterpillar with hair like Medusa's covering its entire body, and it awakened in me a sense of curious revulsion. A human bystander, I first felt sorry for the caterpillar. Then I realized, however, that the caterpillar would have been eating the tomato plant had it not been food for the young wasps. And the wasps, of course, need to eat too. I can't say that wasps are my favorite creatures as their frantic search for sugar this time of the year makes them quite a nuisance at every picnic table, but they do their fair share around the garden - pollinating and reducing the pest population (as in this case) that would be dining on our crops. The natural world, fortunately, cares not about my emotions nor my approval, and life goes on. Which means so does death – for all things must eat to live.



Watching this drama play out with the wasps and the caterpillar and the tomato plant led me to reflect on our human communities. We are part of this beautiful destructive circle of life. We, too, need to eat, and so whether we're eating carrots or chicken, we are eating something that was alive and is no longer. There is no way to transcend this and survive. So as I eat, I must give thanks, I must not waste, and I must make my life worthy of the sacrifice of the carrot and the chicken.

Our human relationships, however, can be different. I don't need to die for you to live. You don't need to be exploited for me to thrive. I don't have to be destitute for you to have enough. You don't have to be crushed for me to stand. And yet, here we are. In our neighborhoods, in our country, in our world, we have tomato plants, we have caterpillars and we have wasps. We devour the flesh of our brothers and sisters in our consumerism, racism, sexism, and every time we act as though another person is anything less than human.

For me, Jesus is my model of what we are called to be as human beings. In his time, as in ours, there were people who were considered to be good and respectable. These are not the people with whom he spent most of his time. He lived, ate, prayed and celebrated with the caterpillars – with the people who were being eaten alive by their society. He stood against the laws and practices that excluded anyone, and he stood with the ones who were excluded. He showed us that there is an alternative to our systems of domination and exploitation, that we can love God and neighbor in practice as well as in word, and we can oppose unjust hierarchies in doing so.

When I look at our world today, I see times that I am the tomato, the caterpillar and the wasp. I am the wasp when I consume more than I need and when this consumption pollutes the environment and directly affects workers who are paid unlivable wages. I am the caterpillar when I benefit from seeds that someone else has sown – when I experience privilege simply because of the color of my skin or when I am comfortable because of where I was lucky enough to have been born. I am the tomato plant when I grow well where I have been planted and produce fruit so that everyone may eat – when I welcome a stranger, respect the rights of people who are different from myself, feed people who are hungry.



Instead of engaging in a predatory system of existence in which we feed off of the lives of our neighbors, I wish we could eat our carrots and chicken with gratitude at table with all of our human family. I wish we could let caterpillars be caterpillars and wasps be wasps, and I wish we could be more fully human together.