"What We Must Grow and Share"

Homily by Rev. Joan Javier-Duval

Unitarian Church of Montpelier

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The delivered sermon may have slight variations from this written manuscript. Video recordings of sermons can be found online at https://ucmvt.org/category/whats-new/sermons-and-podcasts/.

Reading "Too Many to Count" by Alison Luterman

…I stuff the bucket with closed buds
and half-opened blooms showing their lacy knickers
and trudge back up the steep-sloped hill to the house,
leaving behind a glowing field of peonies, too many to count,
like my father's many kindnesses over the decades—
pots of soup, loaves of home-baked bread,
hours of earnest listening.,
all offered with the same voluptuous generosity
as now when he takes the laden bucket from my arms
and tells me to divide the bounty into smaller bunches
so he can distribute them among the neighbors.[1]

Homily

The renowned physicist Albert Einstein spent the last two decades of his life in Princeton, New Jersey. He bequeathed to the world his theory of relativity, quantum physics, and new understandings of the universe. He also left a more humble legacy: a flower now known as Einstein's begonia.

In the yard of his Princeton home, there was a unique breed of begonia—a cross between a Brazilian variety and a Swiss plant commonly called angel wing. Before he died, Einstein left the plant to his secretary, who loved sharing cuttings. These were passed to neighbors, friends, and especially fellow physicists. Today, Einstein's begonia grows across Princeton—and even on other continents.

[1] Alison Luterman, "Too Many to Count," from *How to Love the World: Poems of Gratitude and Hope*, ed. James Crews (Storey Publishing, 2021), 108-109.

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Isn't it remarkable that something as humble as a flower can become a legacy of connection and beauty? Like that begonia, our lives—our care and resilience—can take root in others in ways we witness, and ways we never see.

Many of us share flowers—dividing day lilies, irises, dahlias, and gladiolas—passing them on from yard to yard, home to home, season after season. And it's not just beauty we pass on. It's memory. It's hope. It's love.

Some grow the same roses their grandmother tended. I've been growing long beans from my father's seeds, gathered from his garden in Chicago. Sharing and cultivating is quiet resistance against forgetting—and an affirmation of belonging.

We keep life going in all sorts of conditions. Like Brother Stefan, who Caitlin told us about, we keep life going even when freedom and joy are threatened. Growing flowers so beauty persists. Planting gardens so there is food to eat. Watering trees that will provide shade and habitat long after we're gone.

This past church year, our overarching worship and ministry theme was *cultivating resilience*.
In the continued recovery from the flood of 2023, we have cultivated resilience.
As we have faced unprecedented challenges to our democracy, we have cultivated resilience.
And we have done this not only as individuals, but collectively.

Resilience is not just personal strength; it's about collectivized care and belonging. Think of the mycorrhizal networks beneath a forest floor—fungi connecting trees to share nutrients and support one another. A single tree can't endure a storm alone—but in connection, it grows stronger.

Resilience is about the quiet systems of care that hold us, the unseen generosity that sustains life. Coming together as a spiritual community builds resilience. Our connections—our help, encouragement, vulnerability, and courage—grow our capacity to adapt and flourish.

In the days to come, we will continue to cultivate resilience.
We will show up with compassion and with courage:
At the big protest.
With calls and emails to our legislators.
At council and committee meetings.

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And—we will also cultivate resilience by resting when we need to rest, because rest is part of the cycle of resilience. We take sabbath not to escape, but to deepen.

The summer season is a time of growth—when trees begin to bear fruit, when leafy greens, tomatoes, beans, and yes—zucchini—mature for harvest.
And while some of us grow food to keep our own bellies full, we also know the joy of sharing our bounty with others. We share what we have so that all can thrive—so that our bodies and our spirits might be fed.

In her poem "For the New Year: 1981," Denise Levertov writes:
"Please take
this grain of a grain of hope
so that mine won't shrink.
Please share your fragment
so that yours will grow.
Only so, by division,
will hope increase,
like a clump of irises…
unlikely source—
clumsy and earth-covered—
of grace."

We increase hope by sharing it.
We increase courage by bringing others along.
We increase joy by inviting others into it—
like music that swells when more voices join the song,
like laughter that multiplies around a table,
like a garden that flourishes not in isolation,
but in the generous company of other living things.

I think, too, of poet Alison Luterman, describing her father—
who sends her out to gather armfuls of peonies from the slope behind his house.
He bakes bread, listens well, and gives abundantly.

She ends her poem with these lines:
"…he takes the laden bucket from my arms
and tells me to divide the bounty into smaller bunches
so he can distribute them among the neighbors."

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That is resilience.
Not just relishing one's bounty—
but sharing one's abundance so that others might also be fed by beauty.
In the days to come, there will be good trouble to make.
There will be tears to shed.
There will be joy to receive.
And through it all—we will keep planting, keep tending, keep showing up, and keep sharing what we have.

May we cultivate beauty and share it freely.
May our resilience take root—not only in ourselves, but in the lives we touch with our care and our presence.
And may we never underestimate the quiet power of what we grow and what we share for the good of all.

So may it be.

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