

CROFTING

Sermon by Rev. Don Morrison, October 23, 2011

Scriptures: Leviticus 25:1-7, Daniel 1:8-15, Psalm 8:6-8

When I received the fall issue of YES! Magazine, I read it cover to cover. I then wrote the following as a letter to their editor:

As usual, YES! is on target with the New Livelihoods issue. The focus on food as well as livelihoods was special to me. Here at the Church of the Covenant, Lynchburg, Va., a call has been sounded to “Crofters’ Mission Group” to grow healthy food for those in need in the area. We like the Old English term “crafting” for its definition of a crofter as a tenant cultivating a croft, which is a small field near a house. It reminds us of all the absentee landlords throughout the ages to this day. We are servants to many, many of them today through corporate-owner structure. But for us people of faith in service to the Great Spirit Maker-Owner, we are the tenants working the fields of the Maker who is NOT an absentee landlord, but a constant presence.

You may read it in the upcoming winter issue of YES.

This latest issue is timely because we need to have livelihoods (JOBS) for people, and people are hungry and starving in many of our poorer countries. And even here in Lynchburg we are aware of these needs. The call to Crofters’ Mission Group is an appropriate and responsible response to peoples’ need for good healthy vegetable foods. We have already begun in a small way by providing some home grown food to our nonprofit homes and people in the downtown food desert area who don’t have easy access to the food stores like Kroger and Food Lion.

Our focus in growing food is twofold. First, is working within the ways of nature to produce food. Second is recognizing the economics of adequate healthful eating.

The observed fact that plants, all vegetation, gives back a little more than they take from the earth, which accounts for the buildup over time of what we call soil. This means that the growth of plants when returned as decaying matter to the soil from which it is grown amounts to a little more than what they took from it. It's a wonderful concept for us people as well, to give back a little more than we take from the earth and from society. We have only the woodlands and the grasslands, when left to nature, to know that this is true.

It's quite apparent that the Israelites and others of their time, that they were aware of how vegetation gives back. So they made it a God-given reason to give the land a rest every seventh year. My own feeling is that this was inadequate for properly restoring the soil. But anyway, organic farming and gardening and crop rotation are ways we accomplish the same thing today.

However, in our time of corporate farming it seems that those advocating it are unaware that soil is full of life ... millions to the teaspoonful as one soil scientist has put it. Another soil scientist expresses the weight of organic life in a healthy acre of soil as equal to the weight of twelve mules. But corporate farming treats the soil as a medium, like sand, to which needed plant food is provided by oil-based fertilizers in amounts appropriate to the crop being grown. This leaves the soil after harvest in a hard-packed condition that requires greater tillage energy to prepare for the next crop.

But soil, real soil, when adequate decaying vegetation is continually being provided, has all that is needed by the crops being grown. No artificial ingredients are needed. Good soil has good *tilth*, meaning it is soft and absorbent, able to take in the rains without washing so as to add to the soil reservoir deep down. When we treat the soil this way, we are doing, what the woodlands and grasslands do naturally, and it amounts to cooperating with nature.

As a mission group, we will be studying and adhering to these ways of cooperating with nature.

The second focus is the economics of eating. One big problem is meat. We use an enormous amount of vegetative produce, like grains, to grow animals for meat. The Israelites had their take on eating meat and established their rules about what meats were a no-no. Daniel was abiding by those rules in insisting on a vegetable diet. Thus he proved that you don't have to have meat in your diet to be strong and healthy.

The economics of eating lies in the amount of feed materials like grains to produce meat, as compared to eating the grains and vegetables themselves. The comparison goes something like this:

To equal one pound of wheat eaten, for instance, it takes 20 pounds of wheat to produce meat equal to the food value of that one pound of wheat eaten. We can see that many more people could be fed if we didn't have to use so much vegetative produce to feed animals for meat. We can see, I'm sure, what this would or can mean for the hungry and starving people of the world. But to satisfy us meat eaters, it's good to know that grass-fed animals can produce our meat. Joel Salatin, over in sloop in the valley is doing just that. He produces organic beef, pork, chicken, and eggs through animals complementing each other, the final source being grass.

So, as a mission group these two focuses will be vital as one of our disciplines, along with the spiritual disciplines that undergird our commitment, faithfulness in meeting regularly, a regular financial commitment, and appropriate planning and the grunt-work of gardening (crofting.)

We are reminded that to be faithful and responsible to the needs that cry out to us, we are called to respond to those needs. Adequate food to those in need is that we cry. Wendell Berry, in his focus on place, adds another dimension to our faithful response. We have a particular responsibility for the place we live, the place we are planted, so to speak. That place, for us, is Lynchburg, with special emphasis on the very grounds around us. The appropriate response is to exercise the dominion assigned us, the stewardship given us in Genesis 1:28-29, and repeated in Psalm 8.

As a mission group, we will keep before us the call to respond to human need and the care of the earth where we live.

Curtis and I are inviting you to join us in this call to become crofters. Perhaps, if you are interested and want to explore with us, we can share with you more in detail what we envision doing. We see it as partnering with the Camp Kum-Ba-Yah programs.

We anticipate year-round gardening, using different methods: common row crops, five-foot strips that can be covered with at plastic canopy in winter, and the use of cold frames we are making. We will also join in helping Kelly and others in their work inside the fenced areas. And we will be open to other possibilities.