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First Presbyterian Church of Allegan, MI

A fiction story by Rev. Karen Fitz La Barge. Written as part of a sermon. All rights reserved.

Every family has someone who loves to garden, and Edith Johnson was the gardener in her family. Her whole life, she poured over seed catalogs and she made lists and diagrams and she took notes on what she grew. From when she was a child through her teenage years, through her romance and her mostly happy marriage through raising her three children, instead of having a lawn, she filled every inch of her small city plot with beds of different heights and grew flowers and vegetables and all sorts of interesting things. Even after her children were grown up and moved away and even after the death of her husband, she continued her passion for plants and for planting the most unusual varieties that she could locate.

One hot summer day while working in her garden, hoeing and weeding in the squash and pumpkin patch, Edith had a massive stroke and fell to the ground. She couldn't move and she couldn't even call for help. For several hours she simply laid there until her neighbors came home from work at 6 pm and saw her lying there through their kitchen window. The neighbors immediately called 9-11 and also Edith's family, but it was too late. Within a few days of the stroke and being in the hospital, her condition deteriorated and Edith quietly slipped away.

Because her three children all lived some distance away, and because they were all working and busy with their lives and children, Edith's grown up children decided to simply clean out the refrigerator and the garbage out of the house and then to meet up over Christmas break to clean out the rest of Edith's things.

As it sometimes works out, one thing led to another and the entire time allotted for cleaning out the house was whittled down and reduced to only one weekend. After their cherished antiques and heirlooms were divided and packed up into their cars; the rest of the contents of the house and garage were simply dumped into a large truck sized dumpster. --Also thrown away were boxes and boxes of envelopes of seeds, which none of any of the children had any time or inclination to plant.

Once the house had been cleared out, it was put on the market. Even though it was January, and a deep snow covered all of the gardens, the rock bottom price that the kids listed it at brought them the quick sale that they were looking for. The small amount of money remaining after Edith's bills were settled, was divided and even though they all missed their mom, life went on as usual.

Until the spring. One fine spring day, an envelope arrived in the mail addressed to Edith and forwarded to a daughters house. It was a letter from an heirloom seed saving organization. Apparently they had only recently discovered that Edith Johnson had died and they were asking about the seeds that Edith had been saving. What the children didn't know or pay any attention to was that Edith had in her later years taken to propagating and saving some of the rarest seeds varieties that they had access too. She had grown a dozen extremely rare seed varieties and over 20 of others that were somewhat rare. With great sadness, Edith's daughter called the organization and regretfully informed them that all of the boxes of seeds had gone into the dumpster.

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Bob at the seed saving organization was very disappointed, but also thought that perhaps there was still hope that some of the seeds had propagated on their own in the garden from the prior year. And so as soon as he could arrange it, he headed over to Edith Johnson's old house to see what, if anything remained.

When Bob pulled into the street and saw the over grown gardens in the front and side yards around the house, at first he was very hopeful, but then he got out of the car and he heard the sound of a rotor tiller. Walking into the back yard, he saw that the new owner had pulled out all of the retaining walls and was just completing the rotor tilling of the entire back yard, the place where all of the most precious seeds had been planted. His heart broke as he saw sections of heirloom plants that were now cut to pieces and destroyed. Even without Edith's help and care they had managed somehow to germinate that fall and to sprout that spring, but were now ground to pulp by the tillers blades.

The new owner came over and greeted Bob and told him enthusiastically about his vision to put in a nice big lawn all around the house, so that it could be a traditional home again and fit in better in the neighborhood. Bob agreed politely and then told him that he was from a seed saving organization and wondered if there was anything left around at all from when Edith had her extensive gardens there. The man shook his head, and then paused and said that he hadn't yet gone under the deck, and he could see that there were some old pots under there. Hardly able to breathe, Bob turned toward the deck and located the lattice that opened up to under the crawl space. As he crawled in and let his eyes adjust to the dim light, there, hanging up in neat rows to dry under the solid decking were bunches and braids of dried flowers and plants. And four of them were the super rare varieties that he was seeking!! While eight of the super rare varieties were now practically lost, there was now at least some hope for those four. Calling out for some plastic bags, Bob meticulously wrapped each type of the fragile dried out blooms in their own bag, carefully catching any seeds that tried to drop. When the last bloom was bagged, Bob turned to crawl out from under the deck, and a notebook in a zip lock bag hanging on a nail just inside the entrance caught his eye. He took it down and carefully opened it up. It was her garden journal. Inside were 5 years of Edith's notes on the rare plants and flowers that she had grown.

Moved by the notebook and the story of what Edith had tried to preserve, and feeling rather guilty for unknowingly tilling it all up, the new owner generously promised Bob that if anything sprouted up out of the lawn in the back yard, that he wouldn't use weed killer on it, but that he would dig it out and save it in a pot and give Bob a call.

On his drive back home with his treasure of the almost forgotten seeds, Bob reflected on what had happened that day. Even though most of society had ignored and forgotten the great potential of these rare plants; Edith had seen something special in each one and had documented all of their great richness of diversity and success. She had seen their amazing potential and had given them a chance to grow and thrive and be the plants that they were designed by God to be.

Bob wondered if that was a lesson for all of us. When we attempt to shore up our institutions from the past by only associating with those selected people who pretend to fit our preconceived Christian stereotypes, we are not bearing the love of Christ. Rather, we are cutting a huge hole right into the heart of our gospel. Our God created and loves diversity, and each of us comes to

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God with our own strengths, our own weakness and our own brokenness. God's garden and God's church is called to be filled with all different varieties of people. From those old discarded heirloom souls to those brand new hybrids. For it is only by being the church together that we can demonstrate God's dazzling bouquet of love and acceptance and grace and care taking to the world.

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