



# THE VALUE OF COMMUNITY

## Farming for the Greater Good

I live on Bethlehem Farm in Alderson, West Virginia, as a Farm Gardener. Bethlehem Farm has been on my mind since 2010, when I first heard of it from my youth minister. In the summer of 2015, I went to the farm on a college service-week retreat with my home parish. I distinctly remember a moment where everything about the farm “clicked” for me. After a week of memorable conversations, home repair sites, chores and reviews of the day, I found that I was disappointed that I could not experience the entirety of the farm that summer. But, I knew I would be back. As a Summer Servant in 2017, I learned more about community living and was reminded of the beauty and joy I had found here two years prior. I decided to begin the Caretaker application process that October, and I accepted the offer to join the community in April 2018 and moved in in May.

### ABOUT THE FARM

The mission of Bethlehem Farm resonates with me, and I strive to live it out in my life. The farm is

an intentional Catholic community that transforms lives through service and through teaching sustainable practices within the local community. We invite volunteers to join us in living the Gospel cornerstones of service, prayer, simplicity and community. Along with a low income home repair program and week-long service retreat opportunities, we focus much of our energy toward our sustainable gardens. We have devoted roughly one acre to growing around 40% of the food we eat, utilizing low environmental impact practices. These practices ensure, not only that the fruits of our labor are the most nutritious they could be, but also that our impact on the environment does not damage life outside of the garden for the sake of the life inside.

As one of our Farm Gardeners, much of my time this past year has been spent engaging with volunteers in the garden. During our service-retreat weeks, I teach volunteers sustainable agriculture practices and share the joy of cultivating life. I also lead them to have a greater appreciation

for their food, for the individuals who have taken part in its journey from seed to belly and for the sacred relationship bound up in food and our eating practices.

### LEARNING LESSONS

I arrived at the farm with very little experience in agriculture. My mother had a garden in the back yard when I was little, but I was disinterested in what went on there. When I joined the Bethlehem Farm community, I was asked to fill the role of Farm Gardener, as the current Farm Gardener was set to depart in a couple of months. I spent that time trying to learn as much as I could so I would be as prepared as possible for her departure. And boy did I learn! I learned about the most nutritious plants in our garden (dandelion, lamb’s quarter, and sorrel). I learned about the myriad of hand tools that, when used just the right way, become ten times more effective. I learned to not become over-concerned by the number of weeds in the garden because, not only are they beyond my control,



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but they also practically demonstrate the fertility of the garden. I also quickly learned to love the daily toil, perpetually having dirt in my cuticles and the wonderful contrast of the heat of the summer sun and the cool, moist soil.

Another lesson I have learned is the importance of understanding food systems. When we are growing our own food, we begin to understand the value of taking time to care for the plants beyond just the nourishment they provide. Recognizing when a plant is diseased or nutrient-deprived, treating the malady and then seeing it return to health, drives this notion home. Sure, the potato underneath or the peas further up the vine will be better for us because we eliminated the disease—but it is by treating the plant that we come to understand its value as part of God's creation beyond its usefulness. This lesson cannot be more important in a time in which people are increasingly valued based upon how “useful” they are. Therefore, when I can engage a high school student to think about the value of a plant beyond immediately obvious utilitarian goods, I find myself connecting Jesus' teaching to a direct, visceral experience that often opens new paths to understanding God.

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Living on a farm allows us to engage in care for creation with every decision, conversation and action. By our involvement in the local food system, we farmers are deciding to reject the corporate farm business model and instead

accept the traditional farming goal of feeding people in the local community. When conversing about these values, we can spread the message of the importance of mercy and caring for others. In acting out these decisions, we can intimately become part of the daily lives of those in the community. These connections, in turn, strengthen the bonds of trust and relationship, resulting in stronger communities.

For my part, beginning my journey in intentional plant cultivation in my twenties has had and will have important impacts. Personally, I am more aware of how my decisions affect the people and environment around me. In my community, I have seen the bonding and friendship that comes from sharing a wonderful meal made from the vegetables I have helped grow.

The future holds even greater returns for the investment of time, talent and treasure that I have made in sustainable ways that encourage environmental and human health. I have learned the joy of toiling with those around me to bring forth abundant life from the soil. I have also learned the important lesson that there is *always* more to do in the garden. So, it is unreasonable to expect us to do more than we can with the time we have and the skills we are given. Much like in life, we are ministers, not messiahs. In this way, the garden has already driven home lasting life lessons that I carry with me, and this is truly invaluable.

