

FRUIT – VALERIE CHRONIS BICKETT



October 2001 to November 2021.

Twenty years.

We were 120 and then we were 40 and now we are 16 and I am one of these. All of us getting older. Everything we own in one room.

Think of a beloved fruit tree showing its age and still bearing--and think of all the harvests, yields, returns, gatherings all along and still and wherever the winnowing and sorting out and sifting and shifting and fanning out and sharing took you in whatever year you left.

We were a thousand and we are now ten thousand.

Fruit. *The sweet and fleshy product of a tree or other plant that contains seed and can be eaten as food.* I still remember the slices of a Candy Pluot our son served us in California after a cross-country flight. And last summer, an organic white peach just the way a peach should be. That smell. And right now in the cemetery those persimmons. Pawpaws in Winton Woods. Figs. This year, that first Cherokee tomato. The Cherry tree in our backyard in Northside. The apricots the woman on the top of my father's island came over to give me out of her apron. And the Apples. My in-laws and their Jonathan's. That gnarly apple tree in our front yard on Circle—the Vogel's front yard, Donna Quilter's front yard—that got blown over in the microburst that we postponed leaving on vacation for to pull back up. The apples didn't look great but they tasted great; Stayman I think.

Fruit. The seed-bearing flesh that can be eaten. Every summer and fall. Fruit all along and fruit still.

When I think of that apple tree on Circle, I know how much we looked forward to the ripening so we could eat. Or save and bake. When I think of just plain enjoying the fruit of community I think of so many things—people we loved and knew well right next door or up the street. The treat then of just taking a walk. The ease of belonging. The bus stop and coffee out of a thermos. Rocking Irene Gervasi to sleep and singing over and over Goodnight Irene. Michele Laumer laughing at me at a picnic for holding our Jack Russell like a baby. Running up to Annie Martina when a cut wouldn't stop bleeding. Bill frying kielbasa in the kitchen after Easter vigil. The nearness of you, the walks around the paradise of Winton Place and the cemetery, living the way my grandparents lived in the old country.

I also think of the Mulberries we couldn't reach, the ones for the birds, how the seeds spread, the connections widened to include New Mexico and California and Kenya and Nicaragua and Ecuador, and Florida and Minnesota and Washington and St. Monica St. George and Bellarmine and Immaculata. The churches and the non-profits and the neighborhoods all over the world strengthened by the ones of us formed in NJ.

I think of the Cherries we were too full to eat, the ones we gave away. Surplus for our neighbors. The strengthening of the Winton Place / SpringGrove Village Community Council, the Youth Center, the Environmental Committee, the connection to the neighborhood churches and the absolute welcome in the one square mile of SpringGrove Village, of refugees and the undocumented. And even after so many of us left, the template of health our presence left.

And I think also of the fruit we lost, the persimmons and apples mashed on the ground, the ones that nourished the tree itself, the life force that went back into sustaining our own community for 50 long years—and counting— so that it has been able to grow into what New Jerusalem was designed to be— catholic, eucharistic and lay-led. Born of the breath of God. Choosing still to pray, to share lives as spiritual companions, to labor with joy for God's healing and justice. Meeting in the Spirit of Vatican II— embracing our baptism as priests, leaders, and prophets.

No matter how you shake it, we were confirmed at NJ in our own capacity to directly encounter the divine, to not need an intermediary. What a weight off the church. We have been taught to tend our inner and outer fires. We come to church/work/school/the table not just to get warm but to share our warmth. Out in the world then, in settings sacred and secular, we are an invaluable ingredient.

We. Those of us still meeting in the living room of the Center and those of us still meeting in small, medium and large faith groups all over this world wherever two or more are gathered, in person and on the phone and on zoom—we who have taken the gift of New Jerusalem to heart can't help but be about learning from the God in each other and the Christ in Everything, as Richard puts it, how to be more fully human. Everyday more learning about that. Everyday.

Fruit.

A healthy tree bears good fruit. (Matthew 7:17)