

This sermon concludes our series on gardening, but gardening never ends.

Amateur that I am, I recognize that the task of gardening does not cease until the produce is retrieved and the frost hits; even then garden related tasks last through the fall. Blessings upon the One who tills our spiritual soil, who nurtures seeds of reconciliation and justice within our communities, who waters and weeds us as is necessary--- Blessings be upon God our Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer.

This sentiment captures the essence of what I would want to impart this day and every day-- our lives and spirits are in the hands of One greater than us. Our holiday plans go awry. Pandemics cause a shift in business and family and Church operations. Our communities face concerns extending well beyond the personal. Through uncertainty we are held by one we call the Good Gardener. Trust is an action, and it is one we must intentionally make in these days. In the past God has sustained God's people through pogroms, pandemics and plagues. In life, and in death, we are invited to release ourselves into the care of the Good Gardener.

We covered a lot of ground in in this gardening series. I know this because I re-read each of the sermons. It was no small task. Goodness, it is bad enough to proof read my meditations and hear myself speak my sermon, let alone rehash them! I will highlight that which has drawn my attention from each sermon--- not the best or the worst, but that which got me thinking and feeling. A common theme I found is that each of the sermons, in their own way, explored characteristics of God to which the bible and experience point. So here the review goes....

Week 1: I was drawn to this quote from Susanne's sermon (April 26)

[B]eyond the self-sufficiency and practical factors, gardening has a cultural and spiritual significance, perhaps especially in a time of crisis such as a pandemic. In her book, *And It Was Good*, Madeleine L'Engle writes about planting her garden in a time when the threat of nuclear war cast a long shadow. She writes, "In the spring, the early spring, during the height of the Falkland crisis, I knelt on the damp earth planting onion sets, and smelling the rich growing odour of the freshly turned garden, and the pungency of the onions. Planting onions that spring was an act of faith in the future, for I was very fearful for our planet. ... So I planted onions, and hoped, and prayed, and suddenly I was aware of being surrounded by the song of the birds, making an ecstasy of melody, and their joy was a strengthening of hope ... an affirmation of ultimate all-rightness ... despite the news to which we were anxiously listening."<sup>1</sup> Could it be that planting gardens right now, in the midst of this pandemic, is also an act of faith in the future? It strikes me as an act of great hope in the God of life – the God of resurrection, who

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<sup>1</sup> Madeleine L'Engle, *And It Was Good* (Wheaton, IL: Crosswicks, 1983), 22-23.

can bring new life even out of situations of fear and death. In this sense, planting a garden can be an act of faith, a spiritual practice of nurturing new life that will in turn nurture our bodies and spirits.” God enacts new life amidst fear and death; it is a trait of the God we worship.

Week 2: (May 3; Patrick). In my sermon on seeds in week two I cited a Denise Levertov poem *On the Parable of the Mustard Seed* which I think bears repeating:

“Who ever saw the mustard-plant, wayside weed or tended crop, grow tall as a shrub, let alone a tree, a tree full of shade and nests and songs? Acres of yellow not a bird of the air in sight. No, He who knew the west wind brings the rain, the south wind thunder, who walked the field-paths running His hand along wheat stems to glean those intimate milky kernels, good to break on the tongue, was talking of miracle, the seed within us, so small we take it for worthless, a mustard-seed, dust, nothing. Glib generations mistake the metaphor, not looking at fields and trees, not noticing paradox. Mountains remain unmoved. Faith is rare, He must have been saying, prodigious, unique— one infinitesimal grain divided like loaves and fishes, as if from a mustard-seed a great shade-tree grew. That rare, that strange: the kingdom a tree. The soul a bird. A great concourse of birds at home there, wings among yellow flowers. The waiting kingdom of faith, the seed waiting to be sown. The Kingdom of God is emerging.” God’s tree in the garden shelters the birds, our souls. Our God is a sheltering God.

Week 3: In her sermon on “Vine and Vineyards” (May 10; Susanne) Susanne highlighted the inter-relationship of Jesus and his disciples whom he calls friends. “A modern translation of John 15 goes like this: “I am the vine. You are the branches. You live in me and I in you; we are connected. When you are connected to the vine, you will produce a lot of fruit. If you do not stay connected to the vine, you cannot produce any fruit. So stay connected to me.” And what is the substance of this connection? It’s not unquestioning obedience, but love: “I have shown you God’s strong love. Stay close to my love.”<sup>2</sup> If we cultivate and nourish our connection to Jesus and his way of love, Jesus promises good, life giving fruit... Jesus is speaking here of rooting ourselves as disciples in the Way of Jesus – that is our source of strength, the way the tendrils and branches rely on the sturdy grapevine for support, especially as they produce heavy fruit.” God in Christ seeks to support our growth and sustain us in our fruit bearing.

Week 4: Soil and Sower (May 17; Patrick)

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<sup>2</sup> “The Vine and the Branches,” in *Shine On: A Story Bible* (Kitchener, ON: Mennomedia, 2014), 262.

In the parable of sower and soils I was again taken with the reckless nature of the seeding operation: seed is tossed on rocky soil, dry soil, weedy soil in addition to good soil. This is quite encouraging when we consider the mixed state of most of our souls and society. It reflects a God who is persistent and hopeful. Consider that the “evil one” snatches up some of that good seed. In the process of metabolizes the good seed some form of conversion might take place. This parable offers hope of transformation for broken individuals, broken systems, broken relationships, broken institutions. We worship a persistent and hopeful God.

Week 5: In her sermon on Divine Gardening (May 24; Edna) Edna drew our attention to aspects of God’s character. Our God is “a profoundly patient God, prepared to see galaxies form and die, chemical ooze hang around hopefully for millennia, information take millions of light years to arrive at a place where it can be useful, and so on. This is a God who is prepared to wait and see what will happen next (Maitland, 52). In this quantum world “God is a gambler. There is risk at the heart; and God, braver than we tend to be, consents to that risk. God has built risk in, has created things this way.... Here is a God who prefers freedom and choice to determinism, safety, and control. We see a God who is profoundly responsive, who will proceed with the eternal task of creation, incorporating into that mighty work every possibility that the creation can come up with. We see a God who invites participation and cooperation (Maitland, 58-59).

Week 6: Pentecost—Spirit as Breath of Life (May 31; Susanne). I quote Susanne: “Today is Pentecost, that Sunday when we focus on the most mysterious of the three members of the Trinity: the Holy Spirit. Now we often think of the Spirit as a Dove or as Fire, as in the Pentecost story from the book of Acts. But in keeping with our Garden theme, I wanted to look today at the Holy Spirit as the Breath of Life – the Life-Giving Spirit which infuses all of Creation, creating, sustaining, connecting, and recreating the rhythms of life on our planet. This name for the Spirit brings home for us that God is as close to us as our every breath.” Susanne went on to speak about the absence of breath from which George Floyd died and our task of making breath available for all. God is one who gives breath and life.

Week 7: My sermon on compost (June 7; Patrick) offered a wonderful quote from Judy Cannato: “Yes, [compost] stinks and it’s ugly. But it is one of nature’s most amazing metamorphoses...In a compost pile, nature transforms our unused, unwanted scraps into nutrient-rich soil... Rain, air, time and temperature [convert] the worthless and the unwanted into the richest of soil for the most bountiful of harvests. In this Easter springtime, composting can be more than a gardening

miracle but a living parable of the transformation [that can be affected] in our own lives. In God's time, with God's grace, our "scraps" [can be transformed]– the hurts and disappointments of our lives – into a rich "humus" in which the life and love of God can take root and flourish. The Easter Jesus shows us that change is always possible, that we can always begin again and again and again. Like good composting, such transformation demands the hard work of surrendering our brokenness, our insensitivity, our stubbornness and our self-absorption and placing it all in the "pile," then trusting God to work [the] miracle of transformation".<sup>3</sup>

Week 8: The Tree of Life (June 14; Susanne) Susanne offered two quotes that week which have stuck with me as I consider the tree of life. In his book *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*. African American theologian James Cone powerfully connects the tragic history of the lynching...of Black people in the Southern U.S...with the cross. From the excruciating experience of having Black community members killed arbitrarily by white people with no repercussions, Dr. Cone says many turned to their faith, making the connection to Jesus as "the 'first lynchee,'" who was likewise killed unjustly by hanging on a tree...Dr. Cone reveals the power of the cross.<sup>4</sup>...It was this connection to Jesus, this view of the cross as a lynching tree, that gave people courage - "It was Jesus' cross that sent people protesting in the streets, seeking to change the social structures of racial oppression" in the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s.<sup>5</sup> Could something similar be at work in the protests today? Could God be working a similarly profound change in the current refusal among so many to accept unjust deaths as inevitable? Could this be another instance of the tree of death, the cross, becoming a green and blossoming and fruitful Tree of Life, spurring us all to life-giving change, to take further steps toward justice and peace?"... And Susanne concluded her sermon with words of Mi'kmaq/Acadian theologian Terry LeBlanc: "Right relationship with the creator, the human community, and the rest of creation is within our grasp. It is made possible by the One who provides for creation's healing – the Tree of Life. Justice is one of the leaves."<sup>6</sup> God takes an instrument of death to offer healing for the nations; this is the character of our God.

Week 9: Fruit (June 21; Patrick) I focused on story telling as a means by which good fruit might come to be. Why? Because I have been influenced by story tellers.

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<sup>3</sup> Judy Cannato, "The Compost Pile" in *Weavings* (January/February 2001).

<sup>4</sup> James H. Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2011), 158.

<sup>5</sup> Cone, 21, 28.

The tree of life image on this page is from the chapel at Canadian Mennonite University, created by Clare Schellenberg and Unger.

<sup>6</sup> Terry LeBlanc, "Tree of Life, Healing Justice," in *Wrongs to Rights: How Churches Can Engage the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*, ed. Steve Heinrichs, special issue of *Intotemak* (May, 2016): 108.

In his most recent book on the cultivation of a noble character, David Brooks wrote the following: “Since Plutarch, moralists have tried to communicate certain standards by holding up exemplars. You can not [cultivate the fruits of the Spirit] simply by reading sermons or following abstract rules. Example is the best teacher. Moral improvement occurs most reliably when the heart is warmed, when we come into contact with people we admire and love and we consciously and unconsciously bend our lives to mimic theirs”.<sup>7</sup> In a children’s book Barry Lopez puts it another way: “The stories people tell have a way of taking care of them. If stories come to you, care for them. And learn to give them away where they are needed. Sometimes a person needs a story more than food to stay alive. That is why we put these stories in each other's memory.”<sup>8</sup> Stories we tell and tell about ourselves shape the fruit we ultimately will bear. God has given us a good story to help guide our way.

In conclusion, this business of growing into Christian maturity takes months, seasons, and even years. Our responses to crises of our time really need to reflect the character of God and Christ. God will continue on long after we are gone; we are here in this moment to mediate God’s love, grace, and justice. God will continue on long after COVID-19 does its damage and systemic injustices wreak their havoc. God is bigger than all these miseries and actually in the midst of them seeking to bring solace and good fruit. I believe this and I trust this. Let us try to follow God’s example. Perfectly?, no. Earnestly?, yes. As plants and trees within God’s garden we are doing our best. Let us receive the merciful nutrients God desires to gift us. Let us humble ourselves to the pruning and the weeding necessary. Let us be gracious with the yields knowing that our fruitfulness has more to do with the Great Gardener than our efforts. Amen.

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Benediction:

You are the gardener, O God, the breaker of sod and we are the soil. Make of us new earth. Cultivate the dry, hard patches, rain your grace upon us and shine your love around us. Cause new shoots of faithfulness to spring forth within us, budding sprouts of kindness, patience and generosity. We hear your promise that stalks of new life will rise up within us to bless creatures and creation itself; a harvest of love and joy. Make it so, Good Gardener, make it so. Amen.

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<sup>7</sup> David Brooks, *The Road to Character* (New York: Random House, 2015), introduction page xv.

<sup>8</sup> Barry Lopez, *Crow and Weasel*.