

Oregon City United Methodist Church
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Series: Online

Sermon: In the Garden

Genesis 2:8-9

And the Lord God planted a garden eastward in Eden; and there he put the man whom he had formed. And out of the ground made the Lord God to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight, and good for food; the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of knowledge of good and evil.

Matthew 13:1-9

That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat by the lake. Such large crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat in it, while all the people stood on the shore. Then he told them many things in parables, saying: "A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants. Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop--a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown. He who has ears, let him hear."

Revelation 22:1-3

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. No longer will there be any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him.

Sermon

Mary, Mary, quite contrary, how does your garden grow? Do you know it? With silver bells, and cockle shells, and pretty maids all in a row"

At the end of summer, it's fun to see how the ol' garden came along. The strawberries are done, the lettuce long gone and eaten. We kept the beets in the ground too long, but the pumpkins and zucchini still has potential. My favorite part of gardening is putting seeds in the ground. Planting is the time of possibility, dreaming of a bountiful harvest. When winter is gone, warmer days beckon, and little green shoots are everywhere. I'm the same way about most projects, I love the brainstorming, creative work, collaborative envisioning, but I always struggle to get through the last 20 percent. So I relate to the parable of sower. I envision the happy farmer, scattering seeds, then checking every morning to see if something is peaking above the ground. If that is all there was to farming, I would have stayed in Nebraska. But Jesus is a realist. The birds are going to eat some of your seeds, rocky soil does not produce, just ask some here in Oregon City how hard it is to plant in some of our rocky till. Gardening is complicated and risky, much like church.

I remember having everything planted in the ground back in May, and like God in creation, pat myself on the back and say, "It is good." And I went out the next day - it looked the same. And the next, and the next. Just let it be, right? Give it water, give it sun, but most of all, give it time. This is so much of what a spiritual journey is like. We all would like to be more spiritual and connected with God, but it is so hard to sit still and be quiet, to find the time in our busy lives, to understand words of scripture, it is so hard to wait for God to speak, and then wonder if we had heard correctly. It all seems so fragile, our prayers pop up like little sprouts,

and you wonder how they will fare against storms and hungry rabbits. To pray and not be heard is like pounding barren dry soil for nothing. To pray and know that God is still speaking, is like pulling the strawberries from the patch and biting into it right there in the garden because you can't wait to get it inside.

This is so much of what church is like. We desire what church is supposed to be, the place of community, love, inclusion and forgiveness. We look upon the holy moments singing "Silent Night" in candlelight on Christmas Eve, seeing our children baptized, looking at the lilies at Easter. And then we are asked to serve on a committee, and find out that behind the organ music, preaching and potlucks, there are budget meetings, coffee hour procedures, and schedules for whose turn it is to wash the dishes. We go to administration meetings and find that just like a community garden, some people like their rows very straight and others would like to plant in a circle. Some believe in no-till farming and others want to rent a roto-tiller. But we like tomatoes, peas and carrots, so we talk and work it all out.

We go through many seasons in the church, with Advent, Christmas, Lent, Easter and Pentecost following each other just like planting, tilling and harvest. It is important to note that every part of church life is sacred and an opportunity to grow closer to the God we know in Jesus Christ. Jesus is not just present in the great festivals and communion celebration. We may find the risen Christ in committees, teams, coffee hour and budgets as well. The bloom is sweeter and the harvest more delicious when we know our hand was on the hoe. And by the grace, we find the love of God in every part.

There are many gardens in the Bible - Eden is one. Paradise. And we, as humanity, got our eviction notice because we messed up. Another garden is Gethsemane, The garden of Gethsemane was on the west side of Mount Olive and east of the walls of Jerusalem "beyond the brook Kidron" where Jesus often went with his disciples. It was like his hang out place. It was a place of peace, of rest, and also tears and prayer. If you've seen the picture of Jesus praying, this is where he's at. The name "Gethsemane" means an oil press, and the garden was located where multitudes of olive trees grew. Years later, the garden was destroyed by the Romans in 70 AD when they sacked Jerusalem.

And we have the garden where Jesus was buried. Says John, "Now in the place where he was crucified there was a garden; and in the garden a new tomb" (John 19:41). Not a happy garden, is it? Mary Mary, quite contrary? How does your garden grow? The old poem was written during the reign of Mary Tudor, sometimes called Bloody Mary. She put many-a-Protestants to death. Her garden was a cemetery, the graves all in a row. Yikes. For a more positive spin, how about this: Sometimes our faith life, if it is a garden, is a place of rest, of fallowness, of restoration. The Old Testament told the farmers of the day to let their fields rest every 7 years, to build back it's nutrients. A time of rest for the field, just as we are to rest every 7 days. Is this the garden you need right now? One to find rest before resurrection?

And the last garden is in Revelation, where the Eden is once again restored. The "tree of life," on "both sides of" a "river of the water of life, clear as crystal," is in the restored garden "bearing twelve fruits monthly" (Revelation 22:1-2). No need to wait for food - something is in bloom and ready to each every month - a paradise for those who lived and died by the success of the only fall harvest.

What do I learn from all of this? It might feel like we are just waiting. Not much going on. Covid has shut down in-person worship and much of our programming. I haven't been to a movie in months. We haven't seen the inside of a restaurant since spring. We haven't seen the gym or a baseball game or a substantial gathering for what seems an eternity - we are in waiting. But underneath the top layer of soil, the seeds are coming to life. Someday, we will gather again. Someday, there will be a season of joy and laughter and barbeques and church potlucks. Give the garden time, and you will be blessed. Give the church a little time, and you will be blessed. Give God a little time, and you will be blessed. Be patient in this season - and let your garden grow.