

“Community Garden”

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UCC at The Villages, FL
July 13th, 2014
5th Sun. after Pentecost

Isaiah 56:10-13

Matthew 13:1-9,18-23

[Jesus said,]

Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty.

[Those] who [have] ears, let [them] hear.”

Matt. 13:8-9

Let us pray... O God,

Help us to be attentive to our lives and our community

like a garden we would grow –

May we do our part to prepare the ground by digging up rocks, pulling out weeds,
while trusting you will send the seeds of inspiration and the rain of hope.

Amen

Going from being a kid in grammar school to becoming a “tweenager” in middle school,
I clung to the utopian fantasies of my childhood.

Make no mistake that spiritual formation is going on with a person
from their earliest age of observation – shaping their ideas and beliefs.

I was 13 in 1967 and by then,

the world was changing in ways that were scary for me then,

but it has been with the perspective of the decades since,

that I have seen a lot of good and hopeful things that had been happening, too.

I took Christmas and Easter very seriously,

but had very little knowledge of what either “holy day” was really about.

The Christmas Tree with its gifts and the Easter Basket with good things to eat
took on their own significance as elements of a sacred “forest” or “garden” –

a place of harmony and peace, what the world must have been like
in the Garden of Eden ‘before the Fall’...

As a little boy who was gifted with the ability to draw,

I often drew pictures of dinosaurs and the world they lived in –

a time when the world was literally a garden untouched by human hands
where you didn’t have to worry about crime or pollution

and Tyrannosaurus Rex – beyond the obvious association with “serpent”,
was holding a place as a powerful figure for a more mature understanding
of who Christ is.

I think I had an early understanding that God and Nature were connected

and the Earth had been a garden populated with prehistoric animals

and later people, without being stuck in a rigid Creationist mindset
yet seeing evolution as a tool for God to use to create.

Willard, p.2

Both sets of my grandparents lived in Florida and knowing my love for dinosaurs, they would send me gifts like a small stuffed alligator.

One time I received a goofy postcard with a huge alligator filling up a flatbed railway car as if it were as big as a dinosaur!

So, Florida was the 'land of the dinosaurs' for me in that region of my imagination where imaginary jungles could still be explored by a kid.

We finally did visit my grandparents in Florida when I was in high school, camping as we went and I remember being disappointed by how much Florida was built up even then in 1969 – though the campgrounds of Ft DeSoto south of St Petersburg were every bit of what I hoped the “forest primeval” to be.

I also remember in my Dad's parents' front yard was a little metal sign that read:

*“The kiss of the Sun for pardon; The song of the birds for mirth;
One is closer to God's heart in a garden Than anywhere else on Earth.”*

It is said that the hardest journey for a person is from the head to the heart and even though someone may start out living from their heart, *things happen* to drive us out of that primitive bliss.

We lose our naiveté as we learn to deal with the world as it is – no matter how much we may want to stay in that garden place.

So, we have to leave if we are to grow – not only as mature human beings who must operate in the commerce of society, but as spiritual beings.

We can create a material utopia for ourselves, but if we settle for just that, then we get stuck in childish fantasies that may lead to addiction when unpleasant realities become too difficult to escape.

Coming to church allows us to venture deeper into the teachings of Christianity and to mature in faith as we encounter the Jesus of the Gospels who dealt with life's most difficult challenges – even death.

In his Parable of The Sower, Jesus describes different kinds of soil upon which a farmer carelessly seems to cast seed.

Some seeds are tossed upon a hard-packed road on which nothing could grow, and other seeds fall on rocky ground that prevents roots from taking hold, while seeds that land among brambles, are choked before they can grow, and finally, some seeds find their way to good soil that produce a crop.

This story should actually be called the Parable of Hearts

because that's what Jesus is really talking about– the openness of people's hearts.

There are street-wise people who won't listen to anything but their own opinion – 'My way or the highway' as they might say.

There are people who content themselves with being shallow – no real commitment to anything or anyone outside of themselves.

There are people who are just stuck in their fears and obsessions and addictions where nothing productive can last.

Thankfully, there are also people who are full of life and generous to share it with others, helping them to grow and blossom, too.

Willard, 3

There is one thing that Jesus seems to leave out – perhaps for us to ask,

“Who prepared the good soil?

Who broke up the road that was going nowhere?

Who dug up the rocks of narrow-mindedness?

Who pulled out the weeds of fear and obsession?”

The answer, I believe, is that it must each of *us*.

Each of us, as individuals, have the opportunity daily to help
with the weeding and the cultivation of a better world.

This could be as simple as waving hello with a smile to that person at the gate
whom we pass by on the roads here in The Villages.

It could be in taking the time to call a friend
when they're alone or hurting.

Here at church, it can be when we greet one another in the passing of the peace –
or by sitting next to someone who is all by themselves at coffee hour.

It can be by getting actively involved in the appointed ministries of our church.

Our Missions Committee is taking a hard look at some of the challenges
that directly affect our world even if we are only indirectly affected.

The National setting of our denomination is urging us to see the problem
of illiteracy and consider what we can do to in our region to help break
the conduit of children dropping out of high school,
falling into a life of crime, and going to prison
because they never learned how to read.

In Jesus' parable, the Word of God is the seed.

Words themselves can be seeds in the minds of children;

And when they are planted, they can inspire ideas
and encourage positive action.

Some of you are already involved in helping to break this tragic cycle
by tutoring.

Another project the Mission Committee is working on

is an 'Angel Tree' to provide gifts at Christmas-time for prisoners' children;

Through the relationships that can form, the possibility arises to help break this cycle
of hopelessness, crime, and imprisonment.

Teaching children to READ through tutoring programs is a start
and so is the Angel Tree project..

There are other things we can do and that we are already planning; For example:

Worshiping together with Hispanic farmworkers through a BILINGUAL service;
and INTERFAITH outreach through a PEACE SUNDAY during Advent.

All of this can help change the culture of violence in our land and beyond,
helping overcome evil with good, using our creativity to build up and not destroy,
to GROW and not waste away.

Willard, p.4

Another project in the works is a 'Community Garden' –
something we can do on the local level which is as simple as planting a garden.
When you buy local food produce or grow your own, you cut back on
the gas needed to transport such goods.

Planting trees helps with water retention because of their roots
and prevents erosion.

Certain kinds of plants attract butterflies and bees and small mammals,
which are otherwise endangered.

There are a variety of forms that community gardens can take
like separate plots planted and maintained by individuals for their use
or specifically dedicated to feed impoverished people;
also as a 'food forest' where fruit and vegetables would be available to anyone.

All this allows for interaction between people
and it is even said that community gardens in urban areas,
help decrease violent crime in those neighborhoods.

So, we can return to the Garden of our childlike faith by planting a garden,
such that community gardens can be both a physical reality and a metaphor.

How might such projects have any lasting effect in transforming this world?
Maybe by doing just a little bit, each day...

There is a story that perhaps you have heard, about a young man who was hiking
in the region of south eastern France called Provence.

It was desolate region of barren plains at the base of the Alps
where not even the ruins of deserted buildings could provide shelter
against the Mistral winds.

It was the morning of the 3rd day after he ran out of water
that he saw a tree in the distance and made his way toward it.

As he approached, he saw it wasn't a tree at all,
but a shepherd, with a flock of sheep and his dog gathered around him.

The shepherd took the desperate young man to his home,
proving him with food and shelter.

Before going to sleep that night, the young man watched the shepherd
sort through a pile of acorns, counting out 50 of the most perfect of them,
and placing them in a canvas bag to soak in water overnight.

The next morning, the shepherd got up to take his sheep out to pasture,
taking with him the bag of acorns and an iron rod
as the young man accompanied him.

When the flock was settled with the dog to watch them,
the shepherd went further up a ridge, and patiently planted each acorn.

Willard, p.5

What the young man saw were rows and rows of seedlings
as he learned that the shepherd had been planting for 3 years!

They became friends, and after a few days,
the young man returned to civilization.

However, he was caught up in a terrible war and five years later,
he resolved to get away from people and wandered once again
in the region of Provence.

It was in the early spring when he arrived and he could see in the distance,
that the hills were covered with a green haze of budding trees!

He was amazed to find the shepherd still planting trees,
and this renewed his hope in people.

Their friendship lasted for many decades and the last time
the young man went to visit the shepherd,

a bus let him off in a village square, where a fountain had been erected,
surrounded by houses that had been rebuilt, populated with families.

The voices of children playing and laughing competed with the sound of a river,
brought back to life by the forest and orchards of trees

planted by the one shepherd who worked day to day to make it happen.

Something as simple as that, done day to day,
with a view for a better world. Why not?

“The kiss of the Sun for pardon; The song of the birds for mirth;

One is closer to God’s heart in a garden Than anywhere else on Earth.”

Amen

Our lesson today comes from Isaiah 55:10-13.

*It is a declaration of assurance that God's promise to the Jewish exiles
would be fulfilled for them to return to their homeland.*

*It is also an enduring vision of hope for every generation
that seeks a world that is renewed...*

[55:10] Just as the rain and the snow come down from the sky
and don't return there without watering the earth,
making it conceive and yield plants
and providing seed to the sower and food to the eater,

[11] so is my word that comes from my mouth;
it does not return to me empty.

Instead, it does what I want,
and accomplishes what I intend.

[12] Yes, you will go out with celebration,
and you will be brought back in peace.

Even the mountains and the hills will burst into song before you;
all the trees of the field will clap their hands.

[13] In place of the thorn the cypress will grow;
in place of the nettle the myrtle will grow.

This will attest to the Lord's stature,
an enduring reminder that won't be removed.

Let us be guided and challenged by these words.

Matthew 13:1-9,18-23

[13:1] That same day Jesus went out of the house
and sat beside the sea.

[2] And great crowds gathered about him,
so that he got into a boat and sat there; and the whole crowd stood on the beach.

[3] And he told them many things in parables, saying:

“A sower went out to sow.

[4] And as he sowed, some seeds fell along the path,
and the birds came and devoured them.

[5] Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they had not much soil,
and immediately they sprang up, since they had no depth of soil,

[6] but when the sun rose they were scorched;
and since they had no root they withered away.

[7] Other seeds fell upon thorns,
and the thorns grew up and choked them.

[8] Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain,
some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty.

[9] [Those] who [have] ears, let [them] hear.”

[18] “Hear then the parable of the sower.

[19] When any one hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it,
the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in [their] heart;
this is what was sown along the path.

[20] As for what was sown on rocky ground,
this is [the one] who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy;

[21] yet ... has no root in [oneself], but endures for a while,
and when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word,
immediately... falls away.

[22] As for what was sown among thorns,
this is [the one] who hears the word,

but the cares of the world and the delight in riches choke the word,
and it proves unfruitful.

[23] As for what was sown on good soil,

this is [the one] who hears the word and understands it;

[this one] indeed bears fruit, and yields,
in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty.”