

## HOW DOES OUR GARDEN GROW?

A Sermon Preached by  
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Texts: Isaiah 5:1-7 Luke 12:49-56

*J*ohn Wesley, the founder of the Methodist Church and author/composer of hundreds of well-known church hymns, was also a compassionate pastor, traveling among his flock, committed to relieving the suffering of those in poverty and the victims of injustice. A story is told of how Wesley, while riding through the English country side during the last half of the eighteenth century, was touched and appalled by the suffering of the poor in the villages of the country. It is said that he began distributing flower seeds to the residents of the villages, and even sponsored a contest for the most beautiful garden. Eventually, due in no small part to the efforts of this one person, the English countryside began to bloom, and to the degree that a beautiful garden can lift the spirits of those living in darkness, that goal was achieved by John Wesley.

There are few people who do not admire and appreciate a beautiful garden. Many of us rejoice in the potential of earth's living yield in our own backyards, and around the perimeter of our homes, and often the splendor of our efforts are displayed for all passers-by to see. And, we Chicagoland residents have access to one of the most magnificent gardens around, and thousands of us visit the Botanic Gardens every year to behold the beauty of nature and to have our spirits lifted.

Gardens are the special showcase of earth's potential for beauty, fecundity, and abundance. They symbolize the focused and intentional application of the miracle of growth. Gardens have often provided the setting for inspiration and have symbolized the idyllic settings for heavenly destinations. Recall that the location for Paradise in the biblical Book of Genesis was a magnificent garden, planted by God, named Eden. Philosopher Bertrand Russell once said, "Every time I talk to a (learned person) I feel quite sure that happiness is no longer a possibility. Yet when I talk with my gardener, I'm convinced of the opposite."

I miss gardening. I used to do quite a bit of it in previous residences, but our residence here doesn't afford much space to accommodate a serious gardener. At the same time that I pine for the joy of gardening, however, I remember that it is a joy that comes with a shadow side; and that is that beautiful and productive gardens don't just happen; they are a lot of hard work, the products of hours of sweat equity invested in cultivating and fertilizing, and watering, and shielding from late or early frosts, and in warfare with weeds and insects. God may provide the growth, but it is the gardener who must work with that miracle to be sure it yields appropriately.

Once a particularly pompous religious person was walking by the house of a neighbor who was working in an extraordinarily spectacular garden, the show-piece of the neighborhood. "My,

my,” said the evangel, “you and God have produced a beautiful garden together!” Replied the not-so-pious neighbor, standing to stretch out his sore back, with sweat pouring down his face, “Yes, and you should have seen it when only God was working it!” How do our gardens grow? Both God and we share a portion of the task and the treasure of gardening.

This particular side of gardening, the side which recognizes the hard work involved in it, usually comes as a price willing to be paid by the avid domestic tiller of the soil. But it should be noted that the professional job of *gardener* was established primarily for those folks who wanted the beauty and pride of a well-tended garden, but were unwilling to invest the labor themselves. Understanding this duality of the gardening enterprise, the beauty and the hard work, the enjoyment of fruitful returns as well as sometimes the disappointment in the yield of our gardens despite all our best efforts, will help us to embrace the meaning of the passage read earlier from the prophet Isaiah, who emerged in the eighth century b.c.e., in the southern kingdom of Judah.

This summer I’ve been focusing pulpit time on several of the Old Testament prophets, including Amos and Hosea; now Isaiah appears with a similar message from God as his brother prophets: that there is little justice in the land, that the poor are ignored, and that the Word and will of God go unheeded. We’ve seen how the prophets chose colorful and sometimes harsh metaphors to illustrate and underscore the substance of their prophecies. In the same way, Isaiah employs the image of a vineyard as the vehicle for his message of God’s displeasure with the nation and the judgment that awaited them. The prophecy begins almost like a love-poem; indeed, in Hebrew poetry, the image of a vineyard often stood as a symbol of the beloved:

“Let me sing for my beloved my love-song concerning his vineyard: My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill.”

At this point, clear reference is made to the hard work associated with the planting, care and keeping of a vineyard:

“He dug it and cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines; he built a watchtower in the midst of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it . . .”

But something has gone wrong. It is the worst nightmare of the gardener, that in spite of hard work and intentional labor, the results disappoint:

“ . . . he expected it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes.”

The vinedresser is disappointed and frustrated:

“What more was there to do for my vineyard that I have not done in it? When I expected it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes?”

Just in case the hearers of the prophecy are confused about its meaning, or about the symbols used, Isaiah makes it clear:

“ . . . the vineyard of the LORD of hosts is the house of Israel, and the people of Judah are his pleasant planting; (God) expected justice, but saw bloodshed; (God expected) righteousness, but heard a cry!”

The prophecy concludes with a proclamation of judgment, *God's* justice rendered upon the unjust, continuing to use the same metaphors of the garden:

“And now I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard. I will remove its hedge, and it shall be devoured; I will break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down. I will make it a waste; it shall not be pruned or hoed, and it shall be overgrown with briars and thorns; I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it.”

An interesting feature of biblical passages like this is that the suggestion is clearly made that God has worked and continues to work within the community of the faithful towards redemption, towards a restoration of the harmony, peace, and beauty once symbolized by the Garden of Eden. God works within the faithful community, so the argument goes, much the same as a gardener labors over the garden. But God's efforts, God's gardening, if you will, fall short of the miraculous fruits of the six days of Creation: despite hard work and the investment of love and nurture, the garden of God's faithful people oftentimes fails to yield anything close to an abundance of good fruit. In fact, the fruit which does come forth is wild and uncultivated, bitter and inedible. The biblical implication is that the redemption of the world is hard work, even for God. And there is much more to this work than for God to be guaranteed a plentiful harvest; there is strife and struggle in this garden, there are weeds and thorns, there are rocks in the soil and there are predators, there are thieves which come in the darkness of the night to steal away what God has grown.

If that series of images sounds familiar to you, it should, for it is borrowed from a number of Jesus' parables, many of which also use agricultural or gardening images to communicate the Good News. It may seem, at first blush, as though the always-troubling saying from Jesus read earlier from the Gospel of St. Luke, doesn't fit easily into these earthy, growing metaphors we have just been hearing. But there is a very real sense in which the message, if not the metaphor, is the same:

"I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled . . . Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division . . . father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law."

No one has ever enjoyed hearing these words from the lips of Jesus. They are onerous and they are harsh, and to listen to the Prince of Peace, the Lord of Love, the Lamb of God, speak in this way goes down hard. Yet these difficult words of the Lord fit cleanly into the insights just lifted up from Isaiah's prophecy: that the will of God, whether expressed in the Old Testament prophecy or in the New Testament Gospel of Jesus Christ, while promising a world of wholeness and justice and peace, nonetheless introduce elements of hard work, harsh challenges to worldly values, uncomfortable indictments against ingrained lifestyles, and confusion between piety and practice. The challenge always confronting people of faith to the call of discipleship to the Lord Jesus Christ is that there isn't any wiggle-room between what Christ calls us to do and what we feel comfortable doing as citizens of the world. "Love your enemies," "forgive even the unforgivable," forgive without limitation, engage in just business practices, acknowledge and

respond with love and justice to the poor and victims of injustice, seek alternatives to violence and warfare to resolve conflicts, tell and represent and live the truth, all these challenges to our world and our living realities by the Gospel of Jesus Christ illustrate all too well what Jesus meant when he said he came to bring not peace but a sword. Of the commitment for or against Christ in our world, writer E. Earle Ellis says it clearly: “The call for decision is a call for division.”

Jesus said, I come not to bring peace, but a sword. Peace could be considered one of the best fruits of the vineyard God has planted in God’s Creation; yet peace, true peace, biblical *shalom*, is not simply the absence of conflict, it is not the artificial cocoon of security the wealthy wrap themselves in against the realities of the less fortunate world, it is not the presence of justice for some and the absence of justice for others; no, authentic peace, sought and brought by Jesus, itself introduces the conflict of clashing values, of personal security and private wealth, of abundance versus unequal distribution of that abundance throughout the world God has made. We live in a country where well over 90% of our citizens say they believe in God. One has to wonder which God that is. If it is the God of the Bible, then we have to squirm in our seats as we listen to God’s evaluation through the prophet Isaiah, and adjusted for the Christian community, of what God has planted in our midst:

“ . . . the vineyard of the LORD of hosts is the (community of the faithful), and the (disciples of Jesus Christ) are (God’s) pleasant planting; (God) expected justice, but saw bloodshed; righteousness, but heard a cry!”

If our commitment is genuinely and authentically to the One we all called Lord when the waters of Baptism trickled down our heads, or as we joined ourselves in active involvement to the Body of Christ, the Church, then we must hear and understand these words of our Lord, for they apply especially to us:

“Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!”

If you love to garden, you know the end result, in both beauty and productivity, is well worth the effort. And if you are not a gardener, you can still appreciate the splendor of growth in God’s Creation. What the Bible identifies as hard work for God, what Jesus describes as division between sisters and brothers, all represent the labor necessary to achieve what God wants in the Creation, what we all say we want when we pray, “Thy Kingdom come”. The Peaceable Kingdom. The Reign of God. Paradise restored. Unlike the words of the old country music song, “I beg your pardon, I never promised you a rose garden,” God does promise each of us a garden of delights, of love, and peace, and abundance, even in this world. Getting there, however, reaping those kinds of fruits, means work for God, and work for us. And we are assured by the very witness of Scripture that, in the working and growing of this garden, each one of us possesses a green thumb.

AMEN.