

THE GARDENER OF YOUR SOUL

John 15: 1-15

Several years ago I was so pleased that one of our church members gave enough money to create the Memorial Garden for an area that was just grass in 1985. In 1988 we added the fountain, but it wasn't until 2014 that it became the beautifully landscaped area that it is now. I choose to begin memorial services in the garden with these words: "Life began in a garden according to the Book of Genesis." Then I add "from Genesis chapter 3:19 we read: *For out of the ground you were taken. You are dust, and to dust you shall return.*" Most people have the notion that Genesis describes the beginning of life, and that Revelation describes the end of life. That is true, in a literary way, but instead of starting at one point on a straight timeline, moving left to right, could it be that there truly is something like a "Circle of Life?" Could it be, as songwriter Joni Mitchell once put it, that figuratively speaking, "We are stardust, we are golden, and we've got to get ourselves back to the garden?" What if life is less linear and more circular? And what if, when we get to the place where, as it is written in Revelation 22, "there is a river flowing by the throne of God ... and on either side of the river is the tree of life (no longer the tree of good and evil) with twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations," our spiritual bodies we are back "in the garden?" Could the garden, now sanctified by Christ where evil and temptation are vanquished, be a place we call heaven? Trees, and fruit, and water there.

Switching metaphors just for a moment, let's also address the usual thought that the Kingdom of this world is at one end of our timeline; then at the end of our lives, we enter the Kingdom of Heaven. Consider this instead. Each time Matthew heard Jesus say, "Kingdom of God," he wrote down "Kingdom of Heaven." As a Jew, Matthew kept himself from writing the name of God out of a sense of deep respect. So he

substituted the word “Heaven” for God! The Kingdom of Heaven- he didn’t mean a place “up there.” What we know is that Jesus said in Luke’s gospel: “*The kingdom of God is within you.*” When we pray, “Thy Kingdom come,” imagine God whispering: “Yes! Let’s bring my Kingdom in together! There! Now! On the earth! Till the soil of your soul; plant crops of justice, love, and mercy! Help the last to be first and the first to be last!”

So instead of looking outward or upward for God, today we look inward. We often say that we invite Jesus into our “heart.” But the church often uses another word too: soul. Author Thomas Moore holds a Ph.D. in Religious Studies from Syracuse University. In his bestseller called *Care of the Soul*, he wrote this: “Soul is not a thing, but a quality or a dimension of experiencing life and ourselves. It has to do with depth, value, relatedness, heart, and personal substance....When we say that someone or something has a soul, we know what we mean, but it is difficult to specify exactly what that meaning is.” [New York: HarperCollins, 1992, p. 5] So today as we think about the images of a garden that begin and end in the Bible, we turn also to Jesus’ ability to take an image with which most everyone was familiar—growing grapes in a vineyard— to illustrate a great truth.

If indeed the Kingdom of God is in us, then God is not only the gardener of our souls, God is also the vine grower, as Jesus tells us in John’s gospel. God *wants* the vines in our soul to thrive, like in a garden sun, and soil, and water help vines to grow. As I’ve tended to my yard, I have noticed that vines grow happily and with abandon. I’ve also noticed that if I prune them, they grow with even more gusto! Pruning the vines in our lives can be perceived as God saying that some events cannot happen the way you might have hoped. Sometimes a bridge cannot be crossed right now, maybe another time it can. And sometimes life includes unforeseen

disasters. Just as disasters—fires out west and punishing winds and torrential water cause destruction—our souls experience trauma at the same time, sometimes from the loss of property, or pets, or people. The soul can get overloaded and overwhelmed by exhaustion or contentious conditions. It has been said that God never gives us more than we can handle, but I have known faithful people who have broken down trying to believe that. They get drenched by tears of depression or they suffer in sorrow. Your soul—intended to be a life-giving source for your daily journey—can be in crisis, just as parts of our country are in crisis. There are times our souls are barely hanging on in the battles of our day. You may be drowning in angry or sorrowful tears while other people may have the soil of their soul so dry that they are burning out; the nutrients in the soil of their soul have not been replenished. So many nurses, teachers, firefighters, pastors, and police are struggling, and some are changing jobs or retiring early. Partly their bodies are taking a beating, but also their souls; the part that makes them who they are. As Christians, what can we do to tend the gardens of our souls, and the vineyards of our lives?

First, keep connected with Jesus. Today we heard him say that “he was the true vine.” He then reminded everyone that his Father is the vine grower and that he removes the branches that bear no fruit. This is a call to be productive, but it is also the assurance that when the pruning of your vines occurs, they grow back stronger. But, being productive does not mean working yourself ragged. Then, Jesus said to “Abide in me, as I abide in you.” Here again, we are to stay connected! Abide is a biblical word that means “remain in” or “stay with.” The old hymn “Abide with me” asks Jesus to stay with you as darkness comes. It is based on the time Jesus broke bread with disciples as evening was coming on the road to Emmaus. So we invite Jesus to stay, to abide with us. Perhaps our eyes will indeed be opened and we will recognize Jesus. Plus, we bear fruit only if we stay rooted, like any vine. Jesus said:

“I am the vine, you are the branches; apart from me you can do nothing.” Keep reading the lessons of Jesus in the gospels. Read also the Psalms to remember how many people have had a kaleidoscope of experiences just as you have. Read the Song of Songs if you need to remember how much God loves you. There are parts of the Bible that feed your mind while others feed your soul. Stay connected to Jesus.

Second, make time for sabbath. Even I have been guilty of not doing that for the past year and a half of the pandemic. Every day there was more work to do, more new decisions, more demands on time. And I paid the price. I wondered why I was feeling the way I was. I discovered my soul was getting dry and my connection with the vine was distressed. God made the Sabbath for us; it is not just a command to keep it; many people have discovered what happens with all work and no play and no rest. We break down. Make time for sabbath.

Finally, pray. When I was in trouble in 1987, experiencing what I called my “Dark Night of the Soul,” I had stopped regular prayer, giving up prayer time to allow my schedule to control my life. Like a virus, schedules can take over our lives. I finally decided to take back my control. So every morning, meetings or not, I started the day with one half hour of prayer; not a half hour of checking the news of the day. Sometimes my prayer time was silence; at first it was all silence. Then my words began to flow, and I too heard holy phrases said to me, like “you are loved.” They began to water and nourish my soul again. It seemed like I didn’t have time to pray at first. What I learned was, I didn’t have time *not* to pray. May you let God be the gardener of your soul and remember that Jesus is your True Vine. Let us pray:

Nourish us, guardian of our soul; guide us great shepherd, and abide with us, especially when our days seem far spent. Thank you, dear Savior. Amen.

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