

October 17, 2021

## How Does Your Garden Grow?

*Gardeners always recognize each other, because they know that in the history of each plant lies the growth of the whole world.— Paulo Coelho*

Recently, I found myself alone in the car with more than a 10-minute commute. I love when that happens because it means I can listen to an entire NPR piece in one sitting. On this particular day I was listening to an author speak about her research on parenting in modern America. Her premise is that there are two styles of raising children that have risen in popularity and come into tension with one another. When it comes to parenting, she asks, are you a gardener or a carpenter? Her analogy for these two styles, in a nutshell, is that the carpenter style of parenting is focused on raising children based on who they will eventually become. This is juxtaposed against the gardener style which is more concerned about who the child is now. This style, she says, is all about creating a rich, diverse and nurturing environment where the child can explore their world in a protected space.

When my children were young I was definitely a carpenter. I read the books and queried my peers about which educational toys fostered the best brain development and what programs they had enrolled their children in. I felt responsible for molding them into who *I thought* they would eventually become.

Part of my carpentry work involved enrolling our boys in a co-operative preschool in the area which required a parent to volunteer a certain amount of time each week. Having the opportunity to observe them interacting with other children and adults, I became concerned about how reluctant my oldest son was to leave my side. The more I encouraged him to join a group of kids playing in the dirt - something he LOVED to do, the more anxious he became. I was so concerned that, the spring before he entered kindergarten, I contacted the school's psychologist. She scheduled time to observe my son- both when I was on campus with him and when I wasn't.

She reported back to me that what she saw was a gentle, reflective child who engaged with his peers comfortably when he chose to. A child who was brilliantly aware of when he needed time alone. And a child who was coping beautifully - just very different than me.

In his pre-teen years, that same gentle, reflective, introverted son taught me that lesson again. He was dealing with a particularly difficult peer situation in school. And when I attempted to counsel him on how best to resolve the issue, he emphatically yet kindly said to me, "I'm never going to respond like a 40-year old woman, Mom." We think we can mold our children. But, I think the reverse is true!

Now, my husband Jeff, more often than not, took on the gardner approach to parenting. Some of his fondest memories come from time spent down on the ground playing blocks with the boys. When they were very little, Jeff noticed that whenever he would attempt to place a block in the structure they were working on, one of them would inevitably shout, "NO!" and the piece he had just placed would be removed. When they said, "no, no, no", Jeff allowed them to explore and build and make their own decisions. The boys didn't want to be told what to do. They just wanted their Dad to witness and appreciate their engineering achievements!

Today, our boys are young adults. Fine young men. They are still figuring out who they are - exploring and discovering their place in the world. And though Jeff and I still have an impulse to want to pull out our hammers and nails, we are learning to trust that they will work it out - in their own way and time. In my experience, life is rarely an "either-or" situation. We need both carpenters and gardeners in the world to help build and nurture a strong foundation that will support our growth throughout our lives.

In our scripture reading today, the Matthew passage makes a case for how we should build our lives. The text is written from the perspective of Jesus who is addressing his followers gathered on a scenic hillside overlooking the Sea of Galilee. His invitation to the crowd is to build a life on his words

and it is the final epilogue which brings his Sermon on the Mount to a close. The version in the Message says it this way:

“These words I speak to you are not incidental additions to your life, homeowner improvements to your standard of living. They are foundational words, words to build a life on.”

I imagine absolute silence as the crowd takes in every word Jesus speaks, as if they are listening to good poetry. In fact, the very idea of building a life out of Jesus' words is based on the Greek word - poieo, an active word that is translated as “do” or “make” or “act on” in other versions of the Bible. Poieo is also where we get the English word “poet”. Jesus, the poet on the hill, invites us to take his words and build something beautiful and foundational for ourselves and for the generations that follow.

Our second reading from the book of Joel, is also beautiful and poetic. But the view is decidedly less scenic! Against the landscape of catastrophic drought and devastation from a horrific locust plague that has devastated the crops of Israel causing an agricultural disaster of epic proportions, Joel addresses the people of Judah. Joel knows that when disaster strikes, understanding of God is at risk. We see that in our own times. When unexpected illness, death, or social disruption occurs, people may feel that God is ineffectual. Or that God has abandoned or is punishing them. To the angry, confused and scared crowd gathered to hear him preach, Joel speaks words of comfort. Assuring them that the only faithful response to disaster is turning to God. Do not fear, he says, for God is your foundation and you are the soil from which new life will burst forth!

You ARE the soil from which new life will burst forth and this is a season for gardening! The key to good gardening begins with meticulous preparation and tending to the soil. Care must be taken to ensure that proper amounts of nutrients are present. Careful consideration must be given to when, where and what crops are planted. We live in a time when large-scale monoculture farming is dominant. The primary aim of cultivating a single

crop has to do with increased yields and therefore profits for the farmers. Ultimately though, the lack of diversity in monoculture farming depletes the soil of vital nutrients creating a decreased yield and an unhealthy ecosystem. Permaculture, on the other hand, practiced by small scale farmers and many indigenous communities sow three seeds. Typically they are corn, beans, and squash. When planted together, the Three Sisters as they are known, work together to help one another thrive and survive. Corn provides tall stalks for the beans to climb so that they are not overcome by sprawling squash vines. Beans provide nitrogen to fertilize the soil while also stabilizing the tall corn during heavy winds. Beans are nitrogen-fixers meaning they host rhizobia on their roots that can take nitrogen, a much needed plant nutrient, from the air and convert it into forms that can be absorbed by plant roots. The large leaves of squash plants shade the ground which helps retain soil moisture and prevent weeds. This congregation is a representation of the Three Sisters model. When you invite the vitality of your companion sister plants and nurture the gifts they have to offer you create space for each other to grow and thrive for the mutual benefit of the other and the world. You are nurturing a spiritual garden!

Last week Pastor Tom challenged this congregation to be clear about who you intend to be, and how you plan to get there. Sighting our mission statement, he said, we are people of God, called by Christ to:

Speak of love, when hate soars.

To stand with courage, where fear stalks.

To call for justice, where racism rises.

To work for change, where systems oppress.

To extend comfort and compassion, where pain overwhelms.

La Verne Church of the Brethren, you have a strong foundation. One that all spiritual carpenters would be proud of. The world has gone through a major shift over the last 19-months. The pandemic rains fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on this house but it did not fall. That

being said, that doesn't mean that difficulties and hardships have or will disappear.

I know some of you are tired of all the division and discord in our country. I know some of you just want some semblance of normalcy. I know that some of you are reeling from the news that Susan and I have both resigned from our positions in pastoral leadership. I know some of you are worried about the future. To you Joel says, "Do not fear, O, soil". Now is not the time to jump in with your hammers and saws to build a new frame. Now is the time to be gardeners. Since your foundation is strong you can take some time to ask what are the most mutually beneficial crops to plant in our spiritual garden? How will you develop individual and community gifts to be love in the world as it looks now? In this process you might be surprised that a pumpkin came up when you thought you planted zucchini. But, have you tasted pumpkin chocolate chip cookies??? This is not a problem.

This congregation has always been fertile soil for growing a variable, diverse and dynamic faith community. By tending the soil together you will, no doubt, produce good fruit, hearty vegetables and a whole range of wild and wonderful flowers.

May it continue to be so.

Amen