

Keeping God's Garden

Genesis 2:4-9, 15; John 20:11-18

Second Sunday of Easter, (May 1) 2011

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Our Gospel reading this morning is that familiar Easter story of Mary Magdalene coming to the tomb early on that Sunday. While weeping with grief she sees the stone rolled away and two angels who ask her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She turns around and sees someone standing there who asks her the same question and adds another, "Who are you looking for?" She thinks this person standing there is the gardener. Only when he calls her by her name, "Mary," does she recognize him as the Resurrected Jesus.

Over the years I've wondered if Mary mistook Jesus for the gardener because he was gardening. Have you ever thought about that? Maybe Jesus had a garden hoe and was doing a little cultivating around some plants or he was down on his knees planting something in the ground and was scooping dirt around it as they started talking to one another? Who knows?

What do you think about the idea that the recently crucified Jesus begins his resurrected life gardening? Aren't there more important things to do? Herod and Pilate and the Empire as instruments of the Principalities and Powers are winning the day. Violence is triumphant. Poverty is victorious. The earth is being destroyed and people are being ground down into the dust. What is God doing about it? Planting tomatoes?!

Our reading from Genesis 2 tells us that God is a gardener. "And the Lord God planted a garden in Eden (a "garden of delight" is what Eden means), in the

east; and there put the human whom God had formed” (Gen. 2:8). Then it tells us that the vocation/calling of the human (made from humus) is to join God in the gardening of this world: “The Lord God took the human and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it” (2:15).

This phrase that tells us what we are to do in this world: “to till and keep it” is also often translated “to till and tend it.” The Hebrew does not simply mean to work the soil; it means to tenderly care for it, to serve it, and listen and learn from it.

Our Call to Worship this morning is from Psalm 121 where the same word is used to describe how God keeps us. In our distress, God cares for us and watches over us constantly. God keeps us. The same word is used in I Samuel to describe David keeping his flock of sheep (I Sam. 17:20) and in the famous Luke 2 Christmas story where shepherds were “keeping watch over their flocks by night” (Luke 2:8), and in II Samuel to describe keeping a household (II Sam. 15:16). Genesis 4 tells us that we are our brother’s keeper (4:9). But it also is used to tell us that we are to observe or keep the Sabbath in Exodus (Ex. 31:13), and the prophets tell us that we are to keep justice (Hos. 12:7; Isa. 56:1).

To keep, to tend, to care, and listen and watch and learn, to do, and to protect – is what God does. God is keeping us and keeping our world. This is not the picture of God creating the world and then leaving it to its own laws and then occasionally re-entering it, interrupting the laws in order to perform a miracle; that’s an image that implies that for the most part God is unnecessary to this world’s function and ongoing life. Nothing could be further from the biblical truth. In the Bible, “the Lord will keep your going out and your coming in from this time on and forevermore” (Ps. 121:8). God cares, God protects, God watches, and God

is involved, participating, lovingly tending. That's God and we are to mirror God and God's work in this world.

Furthermore, gardens are central in the biblical story from beginning to end. The Garden of Eden is about Creation. The Garden of Gethsemane is about Jesus and the Crucifixion. Then there is the Garden of the Resurrection. And at the end of all history in the book of Revelation in the last chapter of the entire Bible, there is the new Jerusalem where the river of the water of life flows from the throne of God, and in the middle of the city on both sides of the river is a garden, which contains the Tree of Life. Creation, Crucifixion, Resurrection, and then the Goal or culmination of it all – gardens every time!

So do you think it was a simple mistake when Mary thinks Jesus is the gardener after the Resurrection? By no means!

This world we live in is not a giant big-box super-store in which shopping is our primary calling. Shopping says that we purchase and take what we want, use it up, and then buy some more. This shopping mentality is using up the world's resources, exploiting and destroying all that God has made. No, this world is a garden. God's garden. And gardening is a reminder that all we have is a gift from God and we are to gratefully receive it and keep it or care for it.

My friend Norman Wirzba asks, "How might our political, social, economic, [and personal worlds] change if we came to see the planet Earth as an immense and diverse garden, the focal point of God's abiding attention, devotion, and love?" (*Sojourners*, April 2011). What if we cultivated a gardening vision of everything we see?

For me personally, my primary way of seeing my vocation of being a pastor is as a gardener or farmer; not a business man or warrior or religious capitalist. To

be a pastor as a gardener is a humble vision, aware of my limits, sensitive that I am to work but at the end of the day, it is all in God's hands. Pastoring as a gardener pays attention to the specifics of your lives and our place and how God is working here and now, with you and me. It does not generalize or try to force us to fit into some pre-conceived mold that came from some other church or denominational office or the internet. And it is work that takes time. It's slow work.

A couple of years ago I was sitting on Wendell Berry's front porch with him. At the time, his part of Kentucky was in a serious drought, everywhere else was brown and dried up, yet sitting there on the porch we were looking at his garden which was green and lush. I asked him about why his garden looked so good while everyone else's had burned up? He told me that for forty years he had been caring for the soil, composting it, mulching it, building it up. He never uses chemicals. Instead, for forty years he's given it attentive care. Now, when times got hard and water was scarce, his garden soil was so rich with nutrients and organic materials that it retained the water better than most other places resulting in it being fruitful even in the middle of a drought.

That's how I want to pastor. I want to work with God and you over a long time, caring for you, teaching you, and building you up, so when times are hard – cancer, death, injustice, fighting for poor people, pain, and hurt – you will be strong and be fruitful as Christ's people.

Part of that work of growing you is to help you be good gardeners of God's Creation, caring for it, helping heal it, building it up, and keeping it against abuse, exploitation, and destruction. In so doing, we join our dirt-covered hands with God's dirt-covered hands in making this Earth more beautiful, aromatic, and

delectable. At the same time, we are brought more deeply and directly into contact with the forever fresh and fertile grace of God.

Amen and amen.