

“In the Garden”
Preached by Rev. Carol Reynolds
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Matthew 13:1-23 Homily
First Congregational Church, UCC, Cadillac, MI
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I know many of you are accomplished, prolific gardeners. Many of you have 4-H and agriculture in your DNA. Others are seeking to cultivate your green thumbs as the local food movement and concerns for long-term sustainability become more and more urgent. I wonder, then, if listening closely to Jesus’ “Parable of the Sower,” doesn’t make you cringe at least a little. I mean, quite honestly, what kind of a farmer spreads seeds so *wastefully and carelessly*—not just in *good soil*, but over walking paths, rocks, and thorns? I’m still a bit of a novice gardener myself, but I thought farmers were generally more strategic than that. Carefully amending, composting, fertilizing the soil. Planting in neat rows. Rotating crops. It’s all very thoughtfully planned out, right? Agriculture *is* a science, after all.

But *this sower* seems to act arbitrarily, like some kind of a free-spirited, mixed-medium artist. Or like the book publishers of the 1980s, my early days in that industry, who were known to throw as many books as possible against the bookselling wall, then wait to see how many would actually “stick” and sell through to live customers at bookstores. Well, I can tell you that, by the 1990s, that bookselling strategy had not only fallen out of favor; it was the butt of inventory management jokes. It was foolish to think that the public would buy a book, any flashy book, just because the publisher had printed hundreds of thousands of copies of it. Consequently, many units wound up drastically marked down on bookstores’ remainder tables. And many more had to be pulped altogether. Not unlike what seems to have happened to a pretty high percentage of this sower’s wayward seeds.

But, say this sower is neither farmer nor business person, but God? How might that economy change? *What is the bottom line exactly?* Is it necessary to scrimp and hoard seeds to be scattered upon only the most promising ground? Or are there enough resources, enough love and care and possibilities, available to take a chance on *every single surface*? Is throwing seeds in the riskiest of places exceptionally foolish...or exquisitely hopeful? What if we exchange the soil metaphor for human hearts and souls? Those of us who at some point in our lives were thought to be beyond redemption, whether by our families or merely by our selves, we've got to be pretty happy that our God is an extravagant farmer who actively seeks to cultivate growth in *all* types of soil—hard, sandy, rocky, clay, you name it. It's all got potential. We've all got potential. God never gives up on us, no matter how inhospitable the conditions of our hearts might be, no matter how many spiritual rocks and thorns we may accumulate there. This is indeed good news.

And yet, this is not an invitation to *intentionally* challenge the grace, the patience, or the power and creativity of God. If we truly seek to develop and grow into mature, productive people of God, then at some point we must embrace our capacities as co-creators with God. We must share responsibility for the harvest. We must prepare our inner gardens for planting. If God works with the environments we provide, how might we assess and appropriately amend them for optimum, long-term growth? Can we take a long hard, honest look at our hearts and identify the obstructions?

How did that stone get there? What is it exactly? Is it a scar or a remnant of a difficult childhood that is calling out to us to be examined and broken down into more manageable pebbles? Look at the many layers of sediment it has developed over the years. Feel both its smooth edges and its sharp points. Think about the forces that have acted upon them, shaped them in this way...

What about those prickly thorns? What are they? Perhaps bitterness left over from a relationship gone sour? Do we inadvertently step on their spikes each day? Prick our fingers and bleed? Do they actually hurt *us* more than the people with whom we are angry? How might we file them down or release them from our gardens altogether?...

And what about that crusty, impenetrable ground? When did the sun scorch and block us from receiving the nourishment we so desperately need? Harden our hearts and close our minds off to enriching new possibilities and ideas? Were our hopes dashed or our trust broken one too many times? Did we finally don hard shells to guard against any possibility of additional failure or disappointment?...

Where, exactly, have all these defense mechanisms gotten us? How *do* our gardens grow? *Do* they grow? Might hope actually live in the rich, mess of smelly manure we accumulate along the human journey? And how do we gauge all of this anyway? It's not like our personal growth is as overt as, say, a bumper crop of strawberries. It's not as simple or obvious as counting the number of berries on a plant. Or assessing their size, their taste, their juiciness. Would that it were. It's far more nuanced and subjective than that, isn't it?

One place we might begin our assessment is in our very willingness to take responsibility for the nurture and care of our spiritual gardens. By way of example, there is a common phenomenon today that is the bane of many a minister's existence---the consumer Christian. As the name suggests, consumer Christians spend a lot of time, well, shopping. They look for bargains, for bells and whistles, for the next shiny thing to hold their attention, if only for a little while, before it's off to the next new thing. But consumer Christianity is not just about being wowed or having a short attention span. It's about consuming...

Consuming is actually somewhat of a *passive* activity. Think about it. Consuming involves accepting and using up products and services, perhaps rating them on Yelp or Amazon, but almost never actively participating in their growth, their care and feeding. Yet expecting them to flourish. It's about blaming everything around us when something doesn't work for us personally. It's about walking into a room, let's say a sanctuary, perturbed at 10:25 and departing at 11:45 knowing the dissatisfaction we continue to experience is surely the fault of the preacher, the music, or the person who sat next to us in the pew...

This is not at all to say that what happens in the church building on Sunday is not important. It is to say that all the thoughtful preaching, all the soulful singing and personable pew partners in the world will struggle mightily--and likely unsuccessfully--to compensate for a garden been left untended or poorly tended by its inhabitant. Spiritual care and feeding begins at home, between God and us.

And so we must be mindful. We must notice. Exactly what *is* the Miracle-Gro that makes our hearts sing and our flowers bloom in vibrant colors? What encourages us to stretch and bend toward the sun's warmth? Can we pay attention, take note, then amend our soil with those very things? More poetry, more journaling, more music, more dance, more quilting, more art, more nature, more running, more fishing, more prayer. Whatever is life giving and affirming to us adds up to more growth, more healing, more connection to Spirit and one another, more abundant life.

Now some of my friends and colleagues would say that all of *this*, the stuff of self care and personal salvation, is wasteful in the face of the immense suffering and injustice that exist in the world today. That would be true if self care and consumption were the sole objectives. But, as we

are more and more aware with every passing day, we are *intricately* connected. We cannot help but sense and be impacted by one another's anger or pain. And so we seek wholeness not only for our own sakes, but for the health of our neighbors next door and around the world. As disciples of Jesus, we have a responsibility to heal and grow into our full potentials, so that we might in turn be equipped to offer care to the world around us. We can't do that well if we're thirsty, tripping over rocks, or stepping on pesky thorns in our own gardens. In fact, we might inadvertently spread a few of these unwelcome calling cards into our neighbors' plots.

And so I encourage us today to renew our cooperative partnerships with God. To set out the welcome mats in our hearts' gardens and community gardens. To bask in the sunshine of God's abundant, unconditional love and grace. To assess whatever debris exists and begin to work through it. But let us approach our projects not as onerous chores that lead only to autumn's falling leaves and winter's bitter cold. Let us approach them with the joy and celebration of spring and summer. Knowing that growth and renewal lie right around the corner. And that the eternal gardener is good and kind, ever hopeful and creative; and wants nothing more than for each of us and the world around us to thrive.

Amen.