

Congregational Church of Pinehurst
United Church of Christ
February 28, 2016
LENT3C

2 Corinthians 5:16-20
Luke 13:1-9

Gardening for the Future of the Earth

A few years ago, about this time of year,
Greg and I were contemplating our first garden
in our current home.
It's that time of year, you see, as the daffodils bloom,
when gardeners get itchy fingers to dig in the dirt---
to pull up weeds
and prepare the soil
and plant the seeds and bulbs
that will become tomorrow's beauty for the eyes
and food for the stomach.

As we contemplated the design of our new garden,
we found a book in the library to stimulate our thoughts.
It was called *Gardening for the Future of the Earth:*
*The masters of organic gardening show you how
to create natural bounty in your own backyard
and help save the planet one seed at a time.*

Sounds a bit grand,
but then gardeners do tend to be dreamers.
After all, there's gardening, and then there's gardening.
There is the backyard gardening
that you and I do in raised beds
and the ceramic pots that grace our decks.

And then there is the cosmic gardening
that is the domain of the Spirit of Life that embraces us.
The tending of the soil of creation,
including the soil of human affairs,
that is God's realm of creative activity.
And we have lots of questions about that, do we not?

Some years ago, when the well-known pastor,
William Sloane Coffin was senior minister
of Riverside Church in New York City,
his son Alex was killed in a tragic car accident.
Alex was driving in a terrible storm;
he lost control of his car
and careened into the waters of Boston Harbor.
Ten days later,
with great courage and great grief,
Dr. Coffin preached about his son's death.
He thanked all the people for their messages of condolence,
for food brought to their home,
for an arm around his shoulder
when no words would do.
But he also raged;
he raged about well-meaning folks
who had hinted that Alex's death was God's will.
"I knew the anger would do me good," he said.
And then he preached on:

*Do you think it was God's will
that Alex never fixed that lousy windshield wiper...
that he was probably driving too fast in such a storm,
that he probably had a couple of beers too many?*
*Do you think it was God's will
that there are no street lights along that stretch of the road
and no guard rail separating the road and Boston Harbor?*

*The one thing that should never be said when someone dies is,
'It is the will of God'.*

Never do we know enough to say that.

*My own consolation lies in knowing
that when the waves closed over the sinking car,
God's heart was the first of all our hearts to break.¹*

Despite Coffin's poignant words to the contrary,
we long to make sense of senseless tragedies
and search for reasons even when there are none.
It is all too tempting to make gardening all science,
with precise formulas for cause and effect.
If you do this then, this will result.

When really, gardening, like life,
is more of an art form,
with unexpected weather, unexpected events,
constantly inserting themselves into the picture
in ways that mystify---
not only us, but even perhaps God.

And when life's events make it unmanageable,
it is all too tempting to find someone to blame---
and if no one is readily available,
then why not blame God.

For some, God is a gardener of the scientific type,
attempting to keep order by meting out punishment
in a tightly controlled universe of cause and effect.
It *is* a tempting way to go.

There is a kind of temporary comfort
that comes from knowing the way things work,
and what to expect,
even if God becomes a temperamental ogre in the process.

Apparently Jesus was familiar

with this description of divine gardening.

He was not surprised by the people's questions.

"Were these Galileans worse sinners than other Galileans?"

"Were the people killed by the tower

worse offenders than all others living in Jerusalem?"

In other words,

how can we make sense of this and who can we blame?

You see, two terrible tragedies had happened in Jerusalem.

In the first instance, Pilate, the Roman governor,

had killed some Galileans

who were making sacrifices at the temple

and then he mixed their blood with the sacrifices.

No doubt this heinous act was a warning to other Jews

to remember that Rome was in charge.

In the other incident,

a tower fell on people near the pool of Siloam

killing 18 people who simply happened to be there.

How can such things be explained?

Well, instead of raging at a despotic ruler

because they feared the consequences of doing so;

and instead of grieving over the results of a faulty

building design or simply the wear and tear of the ages,

they blamed God and then they blamed the victims.

"Were they worse than other people," they asked?

"Was God punishing them for their sins,"

they whispered?

Frustrated, but not surprised by their questions,

initially Jesus' response shows his impatience.

"If God were a God who meted out punishment for sin,

then we'd all better watch our backs,"

he seems to suggest.

But then he does what Jesus does best.

He tells a story that turns **their** perception of the world,
and **our** perception of the world,
on its head.

Suppose God is not that kind of gardener, Jesus says.

Suppose God is not so much a scientific gardener
who lives by the limits of cause and effect,
and yanks up sinners and burns them in the fire,
like trees that do not bear fruit.

You see, Jesus sighs and begins,

a man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard
and he came looking for fruit on it and found none.
For three years I've come looking for fruit on this fig tree
and still I find none.

Cut it down!

Why should it be wasting the soil?

But the gardener says to the owner,

Sir, let it alone for one more year
until I dig around it and put manure on it
and talk to it every morning.

Let's see what happens then.

Instead of gardening based on the sins of the past,
why not give gardening for the future a chance.

I am reminded of a modern-day parable.

NPR commentator Michael Garofalo told the story

a few years ago on Morning Edition

*[of] a 31 year-old New York City social worker
named Julio Diaz.*

Garofalo noted that Diaz customarily followed

*the same routine each evening,
ending his hour-long subway commute*

to the Bronx one stop early,

just so he could eat at his favorite diner.

*But one night as Diaz stepped off the No. 6 train
and onto a nearly empty nearby platform,
his evening took an unexpected turn.*

*He was walking toward the stairs
when a teenage boy approached and pulled out a knife
and asked for his money.*

*So Diaz gave the boy his wallet.
As his assailant began to walk away, Diaz said,
“Hey wait a minute. You forgot something.
If you’re going to be robbing people all night,
you might as well take my coat to stay warm.”*

*The young man looked at his victim like he was crazy,
and asked, “Why are you doing this?”*

*Diaz replied, “Well, if you’re willing
to risk your freedom for a few dollars,
then you must **really** need the money.”*

*I mean all I wanted to do was get dinner...
and if you want to join me...*

*hey, you’re more than welcome.”
“I just felt maybe he really needed help,” Diaz said.*

*Remarkably, the boy agreed,
and the unlikely pair walked into the diner
and sat at a booth.*

*Shortly the manager came by,
the dishwasher came by,
and the waiters came by to greet Diaz.*

*He remembered, “The kid was like,
‘You know everybody here. Do you own this place?’*

“No,” Diaz replied, “I just eat here a lot.”

*The boy responded,
“But you’re even nice to the dishwasher.”*

*“Well, haven’t you been taught
that you should be nice to everybody?” Diaz asked him.
“Yeah, but I didn’t think people
actually behaved that way,” the boy said.*

The social worker saw an opening.

He asked the boy what he wanted out of life.

“He just had [such] a sad face,” Diaz said.

“He couldn’t answer---or he didn’t want to.

When the bill arrived, Diaz told the teen,

*“Look, I guess **you’re** going to have to pay for this bill
‘cause you have my money and I can’t pay for it.*

*But if you give me my wallet back,
I’ll gladly treat you.”*

The teen “didn’t even think about it”

and handed over the wallet, Diaz said.

“So I gave him \$20...

I figured maybe it would help him...”

But Diaz asked for something in return,

and the boy gave it to him.

It was his knife.²

In Jesus’ parable the gospel writers are suggesting
that Jesus shows us the true heart of God.

That in Jesus the gardener

who dines with prostitutes and sinners,

we see a God who is not interested in keeping score
and punishing the perps

based on the bad behavior of their past

but rather on the potential of their future.

Instead God is interested in patiently tilling the soil of all our lives
until we can come to that place of repenting and letting go
of all the things that stand in the way
of becoming the people God made us to be.

And the real life parable of social worker Diaz and his assailant,
suggests to me what the apostle Paul suggests to me
when he says that in Christ
we are ambassadors of reconciliation.

We who seek to follow Jesus
are called to be gardeners of the future of the earth,
gardening in the manner that Jesus gardens.

We can have a justice system
that merely punishes people for past deeds,
or we can create a system
that opens people to the possibility
of a transformed future.

We can blame the victims of poverty for their fate,
and perpetuate past systems that keep them there,
and talk *at* them without listening *to* them.

Or we can be vulnerable enough
to sit down and dine with them,
and come to some new understanding
and empathy for their plight,
and partner with them
in making the soil of their lives and ours
more fertile for future growth.

We can respond to the verbal and emotional assaults
of friends and strangers by
pulling a literal or figurative trigger
that ends the possibility of any future.

Or we can become ambassadors of reconciliation,
courageously tilling the soil of our relationships
in ways that nurture dialogue, understanding,
and foster heart-felt repentance and mutual forgiveness.

These are not easy characteristics to develop.
It is a journey for all of us.
But as the community of Christ,
that is the journey we are on together,
Offering love and support all along the way.

So I end where I began, with a book title---
Gardening for the Future of the Earth:
The masters of organic gardening show you how.....
to save the planet one seed at a time.

May it be so. Amen.
Rev. Brent A. Bissette

¹*Eulogy for Alex, Rev. Dr. William Sloane Coffin, 1983.*

²As heard on NPR's *Morning Edition*, March 28, 2008, as reported
by Michael Garofalo.

[This sermon first preached on March 10, 2013.]