

Sunday, January 22
9:00am & 11:00am

Faithful Gardening



“Faithful Gardening”
January 22, 2023 | 3rd Sunday after Epiphany
Charlie Berthoud | Matthew 22:33-40, Isaiah 65:17-25

Tomatoes, parsley, and flowers.

Growing up in Connecticut, my mom had three gardens in the backyard—a vegetable garden, an herb garden, and a flower garden. What I remember most are the tomatoes, the parsley, and the flowers. I also remember my mom working in the garden a lot.

Occasionally had success in getting me or my brothers to help. And when I was helping, I remember having a sense of wonder at how those little, tiny seeds, from those little paper packets, could grow into tomatoes, parsley, and flowers.

Sadly, I’m not much of a gardener today. I was given a plant for my office when I started here in 2013, and I’ve managed to keep it alive, although it’s going through a rough time right now.

Even though I didn’t inherit my mom’s gardening skills or cultivate them (see what I did there?), I still do have a great appreciation and sense of awe for gardens and the miraculous process of growth.

How incredible it is that an apple seed can grow into a tree that produces hundreds more apples?

Did you ever notice that the Bible begins and ends with a garden? In Genesis chapter one, we read about the creation of land and seas, plants and trees, mountains, birds, fish, land animals, and humanity. In Genesis 2, Adam and Eve are in the Garden of Eden, surrounded by trees with fruit.



An apple is traditionally understood to be the fruit involved with Adam and Eve, although scholars say it would more likely be a pomegranate or a fig or a grape.

In Revelation 22, the final chapter of the Bible, in a book that invites us to think about the end of things, we read about a river with the water of life and about trees with twelve kinds of fruit, and leaves for the healing of nations.

“Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month, and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.”

If the Bible begins with a garden and ends with a garden, then it seems to end that the implicit message here is that we are called to be faithful gardeners.

I don't think that means we have to grow tomatoes, parsley, flowers and have picture-perfect gardens, but I do think it means we need to take care of this earth intentionally and consistently.

Scripture affirms the importance of this world, this earth.

“The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it,
the world, and those who live in it.” (Psalm 24.1)

“Lord, you set the earth on its foundations,
so that it shall never be shaken.” (Psalm 104.5)

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” (John 3.16)

We do read in scripture about God making all things new, and we hear the phrase “a new heaven and a new earth”, but the focus is really on **renewal** of earth. It's not about destroying this earth and going somewhere else.

Renewal of this earth as part of God's plan. We pray about this every Sunday as Jesus taught his followers: “thy Kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth.”

Sadly, many religious people have what could be called a “replacement” perspective on earth, thinking that this is only a temporary home, and that heaven is somewhere else.

In *Creation Care: A Biblical Theology of the Natural World*, biblical scholar Douglas Moo writes for those folks who seem to think it's OK to despoil the earth since, they believe, God is going to evacuate us. He writes:

“The ‘transformation’ model best summarizes the varied teachings of the Bible about the future of creation.... There is no doubt that a belief that our present creation will continue in some form into eternity provides a stronger basis for creation care than the alternative ‘replacement’ model. The longer we think something is going to last, the better we take care of it.”

—Douglas J. Moo in *A Biblical Theology of the Natural World* (p. 146)

The earth is our home. And it will be home for our children and their children and theirs. And apparently, it's our eternal home in some way shape or form.

Our Scripture reading for today comes from Isaiah 65, giving people a vision of God's future. It begins with language about new heaven and earth, but the text has clear emphasis on renewing this earth. Instead of being full of angels flying around playing harps in the clouds, this vision is focused on very earthly things like **creation, relationships, and justice**.

This is what Jesus focused on—talking about seeds growing in creation, building relationships of love with one's neighbors and even enemies, and seeking justice with the last being first and the blessing of the poor.

As I read from Isaiah, notice:

- the **creation** reality of vineyards and houses, lions and lambs
- the **relational** reality of people interacting and living longer
- and the **justice** reality of people getting a fair share—working for a fair wage and having a decent place to live.

And notice the focus on transforming, not evacuating, Jerusalem. As you hear “Jerusalem,” maybe think Madison.

Listen for God's word:

“For I am about to create new heavens
and a new earth;
the former things shall not be remembered
or come to mind.

But be glad and rejoice forever
in what I am creating,
for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy
and its people as a delight.
I will rejoice in Jerusalem
and delight in my people;
no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it
or the cry of distress.
No more shall there be in it
an infant who lives but a few days
or an old person who does not live out a lifetime,
for one who dies at a hundred years will be considered a youth,
and one who falls short of a hundred will be considered accursed.
They shall build houses and inhabit them;
they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit.
They shall not build and another inhabit;
they shall not plant and another eat,
for like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be,
and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands.
They shall not labor in vain
or bear children for calamity,
for they shall be offspring blessed by the Lord—
and their descendants as well.
Before they call I will answer,
while they are yet speaking I will hear.
The wolf and the lamb shall feed together;
the lion shall eat straw like the ox,
but the serpent—its food shall be dust!
They shall not hurt or destroy
on all my holy mountain,
says the Lord.”

Thanks be to God for the words of Scripture.

Quiz time! Who remembers what I wrote about on the first page of our January newsletter, the Caravan?

I quoted from the constitution of the Presbyterian Church, the *Book of Order*, in the section about the ministry of members, the things that members are expected to

do. The list has what you might expect: worship, Bible study, prayer, caring for neighbors, etc. [See list at end of sermon]

One of the twelve expectations of members, according to our constitution is “caring for God’s creation.”

As Presbyterians, part of our “job description” is to care for creation. When we join, or celebrate baptism or confirmation, we make promises to turn from the ways of evil and turn to Jesus Christ. Thinking about creation care needs to be part of our turning.

Using less paper is good. Using less plastic is good. Eating less red meat is good. Driving less and driving hybrid or electric cars are good things too.

But we need to look at the big picture.

The greatest commandment according to Jesus is to love God and neighbor, as we read in Matthew 22. This means all of our neighbors, not just the people who live near us or look like us or think like us.

In our world today, the reality of climate change is currently an inconvenience for most of us here in the comfort of Madison. But for millions of poor people around the world, it’s becoming a matter of danger, even life and death.

The Matthew 25 initiative helps us reframe this issue.

Covenant is a *Matthew 25 congregation*, which means we’ve joined thousands of Presbyterians in heeding the spirit of Matthew 25 where Jesus said:

“I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.... Just as you did it to one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did it to me.”

In the spirit of caring for people and thinking about the big picture, the Matthew 25 initiative



calls us to strive for:

- Building congregational vitality
- Dismantling structural racism
- Eradicating systemic poverty

In terms of creation care and congregational vitality, we are doing good things here at Covenant with recycling, composting, more efficient heating and cooling, and our solar panels which were installed five years ago.

But we need to consider issues in the world around us, as today's environmental problems are disproportionately impacting poor people and people of color.

Pro-business Forbes magazine cites a study from University of Southern California which states that the...

“...consequences of climate change, including extreme heat, devastating floods and air pollution, result in higher risks of death for African Americans and low-income individuals compared to white and wealthier neighborhoods.”

<https://www.forbes.com/advisor/personal-finance/communities-of-color-and-climate-change/>

Multiple other studies and scholars recognize environmental problems are more severe for people of color and poor people. For example:

- Low-income housing is located near sewage treatment plants, landfills, power plants, or toxic dumps.
- Migrant farm workers experience health problems from pesticide-laden fields.

We saw this in Peru, three and a half years ago, with our youth-adult mission trip, focused on environmental issues.

We went to the city of La Oroya, far away from the wealth of the big cities.

In La Oroya, massive mining operations have polluted the landscape and sickened the people. The mountains around La Oroya have what looks like snow or white frosting, but it's really sulfur dioxide from the mining.



One St. Louis University study about fifteen years ago showed that virtually all of kids had lead poisoning.

It's a complicated situation, but the essence is about a wealthy and powerful corporation ignoring the Peruvian environmental laws, and as a result, the people in La Oroya suffer.

Thanks to the work of Presbyterian Mission Co Workers Jed and Jenny Koball, and many other Peruvian groups, the people of La Oroya have spoken out against the mining practices and things are slowly improving.

And at the same time, they've started planting trees. Thousands of trees. Something like 30,000 at last count. We got to help plant a few trees while we were there.



The trees are helping to eradicate the toxic pollution and reclaim the land.

In La Oroya, they are being faithful gardeners.

Thy kingdom come thy will be done, on earth, as it is in heaven.

At the conclusion of John's gospel, we read about Mary, coming to the tomb alone. After encountering angels, she sees someone who asks her "Why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?"

Then before realizing that this person was the resurrected Jesus, the one who came to bring life to the whole world, the text says that Mary thought he was the gardener.

Her first instincts were pretty good. In addition to being Lord and Savior, teacher and friend, light and bread, and way and truth and life, Jesus is the gardener, showing us how to love our neighbors and care for this world.

Amen.

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G-1.0304 The Ministry of Members

Membership in the Church of Jesus Christ is a joy and a privilege. It is also a commitment to participate in Christ's mission. A faithful member bears witness to God's love and grace and promises to be involved responsibly in the ministry of Christ's Church.

Such involvement includes:

- proclaiming the good news in word and deed,
- taking part in the common life and worship of a congregation,
- lifting one another up in prayer, mutual concern, and active support,
- studying Scripture and the issues of Christian faith and life,
- supporting the ministry of the church through the giving of money, time, and talents,
- demonstrating a new quality of life within and through the church,

- responding to God’s activity in the world through service to others,
- living responsibly in the personal, family, vocational, political, cultural, and social relationships of life,
- working in the world for peace, justice, freedom, and human fulfillment,
- caring for God’s creation,
- participating in the governing responsibilities of the church, and
- reviewing and evaluating regularly the integrity of one’s membership, and considering ways in which one’s participation in the worship and service of the church may be increased and made more meaningful.