

A Time to Grow: Order

March 6, 2022

Bendersville & Wenksville United Methodist Churches

Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-17

Matthew 4:1-13

When I was about 10 years old or so, my family was going through a difficult time in life. My parents were splitting up; my dad was getting remarried; and everything that I thought I knew in life was changing. Everything in life felt upside-down. I was trying to learn how to live not in one home, but in two. With not two parents, but three. My stepmom had a son who was older than me, so I was wrestling with what it meant that I was no longer the oldest kid in the house – and a little part of me kinda felt like I had been de-throned. Old routines that our family used to do didn't happen anymore, but new routines were emerging. My previously agnostic parents were now going to church, out of the blue. We were praying before meals for the first time. And while time would show that this was good, and healthy, and life-giving, in the moment it felt awkward and weird and baffling and deeply-unsettling.

My mom was unsettled, too. And so, that first year after my parents' divorce, my mom did something that would help her to feel like she was bringing some order to the chaos: She planted a garden.

I don't mean that my mom went to the garden center at Walmart and picked out some flowers and transplanted them into a strip of dirt in front of the house and just hoped for the best. That's my idea of gardening. Not hers.

When I say my mom planted a garden, I mean she transformed the entire backyard. She started by making a compost bin that she put in one corner of the yard, that she would add food waste and grass trimmings and goodness-knows-what-else to. Then, after some time had passed when she had enough compost, she would spend hours upon hours with a shovel and a hose, softening and tilling the rocky desert soil along the fenceline. Spraying it down with water and tilling it some more; adding in some compost and tilling it some more, pulling out rocks and working the earth until it was no longer just a hard, flat bit of ground, but something that looked like it could maybe support life.

And then, she went to work planning. It was a big yard that had some big raised cinderblock planters built in and a good bit of space, so she mapped out what was going to get planted where. What plants would thrive better in a raised bed, and what plants should be planted closer to the ground? What parts of the yard got full sun? What parts were partly shaded? Which parts would be pointless to try to grow anything in at all? Where were the long stretches that she could plant things like melon plants that reach and sprawl? What plants could she plant next to each other in a more compact way? When should she plant what, given typical New Mexico weather patterns? How could

she ensure that all of that good soil that she had spent so much time laboring over would stay nice and moist and rich and fertile – given, you know, that this was the desert, and water doesn't just fall out of the sky there? At least, not very often.

So once she had her plan, she went to work burying soaker hoses, and planting seeds, and watering, and weeding, and threatening my sister and me within an inch of our lives, lest we be tempted to go trampling those parts of the yard.

And after some time, and hours upon hours upon hours of hard work, we had tomatoes, and cucumbers, and cantaloupes, and watermelons. Peppers and eggplant (I'd never seen an eggplant before in my life – and I did *not* trust them) and carrots and pumpkins and zucchini. She grew sunflowers and ornamental corn and even some flowers in the flowerbeds.

And she wasted nothing. My mom didn't have much money, so she had to get creative about how to make every penny stretch. We got a chicken, that would lay eggs, and the eggshells, and all of the bits of everything that we did not eat would go right out into the compost bin, so that they could break down and go back into the garden again. When the garden plants would go to seed, she would collect the seeds to plant again the next year – so that she wouldn't have to buy seeds again. When we would splurge and buy citrus fruits at the grocery store, she would keep the peels, and dry them, and combine them with dried flowers from the garden to make potpourri to make the house smell nice. She used the decorative corn to make gorgeous southwestern wreaths to hang on the walls, and that made our new house start to feel like a home. She showed my sister and me how to pick fresh flowers, and then press them between the pages of a book, so that years from now when you open up that book you get a little surprise.

So unfortunately, I don't think I got my mom's gardening gene. But I did learn a lot, watching her that year. Some of what I learned was about soil and plants and gardens, but most of what I learned was deeper than all of that.

I learned that things can, indeed, grow in the desert. Dry, rocky soil definitely makes things harder, but with some care and intentionality, good things can still grow. For me as a preteen having to grow up in a broken family system, this lesson was *critical* for me. My roots weren't necessarily growing down into the healthiest soil, but that didn't mean that I didn't have a chance at living a beautiful life. It would just take some extra work.

I learned where food comes from. And that food generally tastes better right off of the plant.

I learned that a little bit of fresh air and sunshine can brighten even the worst day.

And probably most importantly, I learned that when life feels upside-down and chaotic, and in the mist of constant flux and change, we have a God who brings order to the chaos – and God sometimes does this in surprising ways.

Today we are starting a new sermon series titled “A Time to Grow” – inspired by a book by a seminary classmate of mine name Kara Eidson. And throughout this season of Lent, we are going to be approaching the garden as a kind of metaphor for our souls. We are going to be exploring different passages of scripture that take place in gardens (like the Garden of Eden that we read about today), as well as looking at scriptures that speak of things that are critically necessary for a garden – things like water, and air, and time. We talked about soil last Wednesday in our Ash Wednesday service.

And today, we are talking about “order.” Which is probably not the first thing that comes to mind for us when we think about a garden. But the truth is, a successful garden requires an *immense* amount of planning and preparation. You have to know what grows best, and where, and when. Some plants love the heat of the summer, and others prefer the cool of early spring. You have to know *how* certain plants grow. Some require a lot of space between them – like melons, and squash. Tomatoes require cages around them, to help them grow *up* as the heavy fruits try to weigh them down. Other plants need trellises, or things to climb.

Some plants grow very well next to other particular plants. And other plants should not be planted next to each other. Some like shade, and others like sun. Some require a lot of water, and others do best where the soil stays more dry.

When my mom decided that she wanted a garden, she didn’t just go outside and scatter seeds on the ground and hope for the best. She first had to prepare the soil. And because of the kind of soil we had, she knew that she was going to have to fortify it with compost. And that meant saving our table scraps and giving them time to break down. And then she had to research what seeds to plant in the garden with the soaking hoses, and what plants would be okay in the raised beds with a more intermittent water supply.

She had to take the time to learn, and prepare, and then plant with intentionality. There is a reason that when we turn to the first pages in Genesis, we have such a methodical ordering of creation. First, God creates light. Then, the air and the atmosphere. Then, the earth, and the sea, and the plants. Then, the sun, moon and stars. And then the animals. And then finally, us. God creates the rhythms of day and night; of the tides falling and rising; of the earth rotating around the sun; of the seasons of the year; of us breathing in and breathing out. Rhythms of work, and rest; rhythms of growing and lying fallow – and all of these different rhythms perfectly working together so that this new creation – and everyone and everything in it might not just grow but thrive.

And this perfect ordering lasts a whole two chapters, until we start to see everything unravel.

God puts Adam and Eve in the garden with their own rhythms; with their own rules about what to do and what not to do. Just like God set the earth on its orbit around the sun and told the earth, “as long as you stay on this orbit, you will be fine,” God said to Adam and Eve “Here’s your orbit. Here’s your purpose. Tend to and care for and name everything that exists. Work hard and reap the rewards. Eat the things that bring life and joy. But do not eat that which brings death.

But as we know, Adam and Eve could not help themselves, any more than we can help ourselves today. They did exactly that which God warned them against; they broke the perfect ordering of God’s perfect creation; and they received exactly what God told them they would receive. Not an immediate death, but a long, slow, drawn-out movement toward death.

A life in which, repeatedly, we seek after those things that we think we want, but that ultimately remove life and joy and vitality from our lives. Those things that take God’s perfect ordering and purposes for us, and disorder and discombobulate them. Whether that be a quest for money, or power, or beauty, or peace, or perfection, or comfort, again and again we reach for that low-hanging fruit that promises easy answers and we discover (usually too late) that we have either made the problem worse, or that we have managed in the process to separate ourselves even further from God.

And that, my friends, is the very definition of sin. Literally, an archery term that means to aim, but to miss the mark. Or, more to the point for us today, to seek order, but to choose chaos instead. Simply-stated, sin is anything that causes harm to us or to others, or anything that increases the distance between us and God.

And this is one thing that I absolutely love about our reading from Matthew’s gospel today. Because we see Jesus, there in the desert, surrounded by all of the disorder and chaos of the world; tempted by every low-hanging fruit out there. Tempted by things like food to satisfy his hunger. And power over the forces of life and death. And success – an easy way to be loved and worshipped and revered by the whole entire world, that didn’t end with him having to go to the cross.

But again and again, carefully, meticulously, Jesus repeatedly says “no.” He lets go of the temptation to reach for a “quick fix” or an “easy answer” – the temptation to just throw some seeds out there and hope for the best – and he instead does the hard, painstaking work of taking a dry and barren desert wilderness and bringing it back to life again.

“Man does not live by bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.” I think I’m going to build a compost bin. And pull some big rocks out of the ground.

“Do not put the Lord your God to the test.” How about water? Let’s bury some hoses so that the thirsty plants will get the “stuff” of life delivered directly to their roots?

“Worship the Lord your God and serve only him.” Let’s plant these seeds where they are going to receive the proper amount of sunlight, and these seeds where they will get some shade. Let’s put these seeds next to each other – because they will help each other grow. And let’s keep these seeds on opposite sides of the garden, because they are just going to choke each other out in the end.

Bit by bit; choice by choice; moment by moment; temptation by temptation, Jesus goes about the work of healing that which was broken in the garden. Taking the chaos and pain and brokenness of life, and choosing another way. Intentionally choosing the hard and painstaking road that will lead to life and growth and healing and vitality, instead of the easy road that leads to death.

One rock at a time; one eggshell at a time; one garden hose at a time; one seed at a time. One temptation at a time. One choice at a time. One intentional movement at a time, Jesus tills and waters our soil; gives us nutrients; pulls out the rocks; brings order into our chaos; and restores the gardens of our souls, so that we might once again sprout and grow and bloom, no matter where our garden is planted – in the fertile Adams County soil or in the dry rockiness of the desert, God can and does spring forth life.

So today, may we make the choice to pick up the shovel along with Jesus, and to tend our gardens, making the choice to choose life instead of death. To choose God’s plans for our lives instead of our own disordered whims. And as we do so, may we begin to see signs of life sprouting even in the desert spaces of our souls.