

A Time to Grow: Life

March 13, 2022

Bendersville & Wenksville United Methodist Churches

Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18

Mark 8:31-38

So today we are continuing through the season of Lent with our sermon series that is all about gardening, titled “A Time to Grow” where we are looking at the garden as a metaphor for our souls, and exploring the lessons that God has for us through the process of planting and tending a garden.

So, you all know that I am not much of a gardener. But I am a glutton for punishment. And so last year I got this wild, hairbrained idea that I wanted to plant a vegetable garden. There are a couple of garden beds at the parsonage that have been there for probably a decade or so, that not much has been done with in years, and so I thought, “Hey! Some of the hard work has already been done for me; I wonder what would happen if I pulled the weeds and tried planting something here.”

And by something, I mean, quite a few somethings. I transplanted some herbs and strawberries and peppers and tomatoes, and then also started a few things from seed: carrots, and beets, and kale, and spinach.

And wouldn't you know it, but things actually grew. I mean, I did manage to kill one or two plants, because that's what I do. That's my superpower. But seriously, folks. I put seeds in the ground, and they sprouted. The beet seeds turned into beets. And the carrot seeds grew carrots. And the kale? Kale must have its own superpowers because it managed to survive the winter. Seriously. The kale is *still* alive and growing.

But in the midst of the excitement over the fact that I had planted something that wasn't just withering up and dying on the spot, I had this moment that caused me some real, visceral pain. And that was when I had to go out and thin the carrots.

Because what you probably already know, but was new to me, was that carrots (and beets, and most other root vegetables) are almost always seeded too close together. And so you have to go out and pull some of the baby plants to give them enough space to grow to their full size. Otherwise, they will be too crowded, they will compete for light and nutrients, and they will not grow like they should.

But these were seeds that I had put into the ground. And they were growing. That itself was no small miracle. And now, in order to give them the best shot at survival, I had to kill some of that which I had grown. I had to let go of my attachment to some of these little baby carrot plants, for the sake of the garden.

Today our scripture readings, at the outset, don't seem to have much to do with gardens. Our reading from Genesis has a lot more to do with the night sky than it does what is growing in the ground. And from Mark – that reading is one of those really challenging passages that most of us would just as soon pass right over. But underneath the surface, both of these scriptures talk about a difficult and fundamental truth in our spiritual lives that actually has everything to do with a garden. Our spiritual lives, like carrots, are in need of occasional thinning. Or pruning. There are things inside every single one of us that need to be pulled, or cut away, or otherwise let go of in order to give us the space to grow. And sometimes, that “thinning” causes us some real, visceral pain.

In our reading from Genesis, we come face-to-face with one of the most beloved ancestors – patriarchs – of the faith: Abraham. Only, in our scripture today, his name is not yet Abraham, but Abram. Later, God will change his name to something more befitting of his role. But right now, we are still getting to know him, and he is still getting to know God. God has already determined that Abram is going to be “the father of all nations” – the person to whom all people will be able to trace their ancestry back. He is going to be the start of something big.

And that “something big” is going to take place in a pretty miraculous way. Because as of this moment, Abram does not have any children. His wife, Sarai, is infertile, and has yet to be able to conceive any offspring at all. So, the idea that Abram would be a father, or grandfather, or great grandfather, or great-great grandfather...that thought was downright laughable. That would be like telling me, “you are going to be a master gardener.” Nope, sorry, not gonna happen. God has given me many gifts, and gardening is not one of them. God had given Abram many gifts, and children was not one of them.

Yet.

But as we see Abram's story unfold, his little garden of carrots does begin to sprout. God takes him outside on a clear night and shows him the stars and tells him, “your offspring will be as numerous as the stars in the sky.” And some little sprouts start peeking their way up through the soil. His hope begins to grow. And grow. And grow some more. But as time goes on and he waits for the fulfillment of that promise – waits for the time that his family will finally start, it's as if God is telling him that he needs to go out and pull some of those little tiny baby carrots. “Nope, Abraham, sorry, you can't take matters into your own hands and have a son with your wife's handmaiden and expect that to be the fulfillment of my promise. Sarah is going to have a child, and you are just going to have to wait for it.” And a carrot gets pulled out of the soil.

“Leave your country and your people, Abraham, and go to a new land that I will show you.” Leave behind your comfort and your security, and trust me to lead you blindly. Another carrot gets yanked out of the soil.

Abraham has to come to terms with the fact that not everything that he *wants* is going to be a part of his garden. He may want to have a dozen children. But one is going to have to do – and it's not going to happen on his preferred timeline. He may want to be surrounded by his family and his community. But God is telling him to go someplace else instead and to form a new people in a new place. And what Abraham has to give up, to follow God, is significant. Those tiny little baby carrots in your soul's garden are really hard to pull out of the ground, once you've grown attached to them.

And our story in Mark's gospel – it's a profoundly-uncomfortable one because Jesus gets pretty harsh. He doesn't mince any words. By this point in his ministry, Jesus has grown a really beautiful garden. And the things that are sprouting out of the soil – they are *amazing*. Jesus can perform miracles. He can walk on water. He can make the blind see, and the deaf hear. He can change water into wine. He can calm the storms with a wave of his hand. He can multiply the food so that everyone has enough. He can speak persuasively. He can speak truth to power. He can make the kings of the world really, really nervous. Jesus is a force to be reckoned with.

And he can also be deeply-compassionate. He gives comfort to grieving widows. Provides hope to women caught in adultery and about to be stoned. Has heart-felt conversations with Samaritan women in the heat of the day, and with questioning Pharisees in the dead of the night.

But when today's story opens, Jesus is telling his disciples that this garden is about to get thinned. Radically. To the point that it will be unrecognizable. Suffering and rejection and death. Yanking the carrots out by their roots. Pulling up so many of the things that the disciples and Jesus' other followers have come to rely on.

And furthermore, Jesus says, this is *necessary*. Because the resurrection cannot happen without it. The garden of God's kingdom cannot flourish without it.

"And not just for me," Jesus says, "but for you too."

"If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."

And understandably, the disciples didn't like what Jesus had to say – any more than we do. Peter pulled him aside and started to rebuke him – to call him out. "You can't say things like that, Jesus! You're not going to suffer, or be rejected, or die. Look at what you've built! Look at what you can do! Look at all the people who are following you and are really excited about your ministry! Look at us – your friends – your disciples! You're scaring us, Jesus. You don't sound right. Are you feeling okay? You're not planning on quitting, are you? You've just gotten started! You still have so much good that you can do! Maybe you're just tired and need a nap. Get some sleep, Jesus. You'll feel better in the morning."

You see, Peter – and really, all of the disciples – had a picture of what they wanted their garden to look like. A picture of what they thought life with Jesus would be, if they stuck with him long enough. And their picture was really pretty cool. They saw all of the world's problems going away. They saw all the hungry people being fed and their needs being met. They saw Jesus growing more and more in power – seizing control over all the forces of life and death. They saw all the kingdoms of the world bowing down and worshipping Jesus. And they probably saw themselves as Jesus's right-hand men, benefitting from the growing power of their leader.

But here's the problem with that vision: It was remarkably similar to the vision that the devil offered Jesus in our reading from last week. The disciples were looking for comfort. And power. And respect. Easy answers and a road to the top. But here Jesus is, saying that the way up, is down. The way to find life is to lose it. That the messiah – the promised one – the savior – must die in order to rise.

Jesus is asking his disciples to look at this beautiful garden that they have so faithfully and lovingly tended for so long, and to start pulling things out. And the things that Jesus is asking them to pull, are some of the things that they rely most heavily on.

After all, who among us doesn't want safety and security?

To know that our needs will be taken care of?

Who doesn't want to know that we are hanging out with a God who can heal us when we are sick or when our bodies are broken?

And who doesn't like the idea that God is at the same time both powerful and *on our side*?

Wouldn't it be amazing – with all of the problems going on in the world today – if God would just wave his hand and all of the kings and kingdoms and emperors and dictators of the world would bow down in worship and follow the lead of God? How many of the world's problems would that solve?

We all want that. We all long for peace and prosperity and comfort and stability. We all want sickness to go away and death to go away; we want war to stop and division to stop and for the lion to lie down with the lamb and for swords to be turned into plowshares. We want tears to be wiped away and for God to make all things new.

We want a garden that is flourishing, and thriving, and healthy. A garden with good soil, and plenty of sunlight for everybody, where every plant grows to be big and healthy.

But the way to get there isn't easy. Because it means rooting out the things that are getting in the way. And that is hard and painful.

So my friends, here's our invitation today: Take a good, hard look inside – at the landscape, the garden of your soul. And ask yourself: Where are the places where I am

growing in healthy ways? In ways that help me feel more deeply-connected to God, and that help me to become more fully the person who God created me to be?

And what inside of me is getting in the way of that? What are those things – that may not even be bad things – but that are getting in the way of my ability to grow; that are blocking out or distracting me from what is most important? And are there things in my life that God might be inviting me to let go of or root out – in order that my garden might grow and thrive?