

St. John's, NL

August 3 - 9, 2009

Rev. Dr. Jonathan Dent

Monday, August 3

We welcome you again to this time of Meditation. This week during the continuing water ban in the City of St. John's, I thought we might take a few moments together to talk about gardening, spiritual gardening.

Jesus himself often used the image of the garden as a picture of our own spiritual receptivity to the work of God. In other words, our hearts are like gardens. We need to pay attention to our hearts, and what is happening there so that we don't wind up having an ugly yard full of neglect, weeds and the worst of pests. Rather, as we pay attention to what is happening in our hearts, we can cultivate something in ourselves, by God's grace, that is attractive to others and draws people to Jesus. Actually, God is the gardener and we are the garden, so really we are being responsive to what God is doing and saying rather than simply doing some self-help work.

You probably know that Jesus told the Parable of the Sower in Matthew, Mark and Luke. Mark 4: 1-9 in the TNIV reads like this:

Again Jesus began to teach by the lake. The crowd that gathered around him was so large that he got into a boat and sat in it out on the lake, while all the people were along the shore at the water's edge. He taught them many things by parables, and in his teaching said: "Listen! A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants, so that they did not bear grain. Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up, grew and produced a crop, some multiplying thirty, some sixty, some a hundred times. Then Jesus said, "Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear."

Jesus chose to teach people by making allusion to something they knew quite well, gardening. Farming is just gardening on a larger scale. And so Jesus uses the garden as a place to talk about being responsive to God. This was a great concern of Jesus'. He wanted people to know God, and he

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wanted them to be learning about how to please God and cooperate with God's ways and will for their lives and communities.

So he used the soil condition in this parable, and elsewhere in Scripture he used water, dirt, light, fertilizer, pests, when to harvest, and how to harvest all as some of the subjects having to do with spiritual gardening, that is, being responsive to God and having a heart that longs for God's ways and will.

This week I would like to spend some time in each of these areas with you, exploring how we might garden our souls, or better, receive the Gardener of our souls, and His ways in our garden plots, our lives and lifestyles. In this time of an outdoor water ban, we realize how thirsty our plants and lawns can become. We realize that without water, our plants can easily die, and in the case of fruits and vegetables, they at least do not produce fruit without water.

So we too must realize that we are thirsty, spiritually thirsty, just as our plants have been. We too must come to the source of living water, just as the woman at the well did long ago. Water is a precious gift of life. To have fresh, drinkable water is essential to life as we know it. So too is the life that Jesus offers each one of us. He calls us out of the desert of our selfishness, and calls us to the oasis of his life giving ways. He calls us out of the deathly parched sin and rebellious life, to a life guided by his very self, by his life giving ways. He asks us again to surrender our gardens back to him, to surrender our very selves back to him who is the Creator, the Loving One, the Redeemer. He can and does rescue us from the drought and the lonely desert. He places us in community and causes us to remember how thirsty we are without God, without Jesus ways and grace in our lives.

Turn to Him today and this week, and we will look to many facets of the garden, and walk there with Him.

Tuesday, August 4

We are looking this week at the wonders of the gardens of our souls. We are looking at what the Master Gardener, Jesus, wants to do in our gardens. Last

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time we remembered him as the Living Water that brings life to every parched soul that would receive him. We also remember his teaching in the parable of the sower from Mark 4: 1 – 9.

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So here Jesus describes three kinds of soil problems: hardness, rockiness and thorny weeds. First, hardness. Each of us needs to recognize how hard a case we are against the Lord. Sometimes we say that about other people, "My, aren't they a hard case!" But each of us has a hardness against the Lord, in some areas of our lives. Where is it for you? Perhaps it is an area of unforgiveness, or somewhere you have been hurt and don't know where to turn. Jesus wants to soften our hearts and sweeten the soil of our souls so that we will be responsive to the Word, able to receive teaching from God, and to agree with what God wants for our city, for our neighbors, for friends, for our families, for you and me. If we are hard, we will fight against what God wants, and even be able to rationalize that. But we need God's grace to soften us and those close to us.

The second problem is rocky soil. I've never encountered rocky soil anywhere else in this country like here in Newfoundland. I always used to picture rocky soil as a good few rocks and maybe some gravel. But here good soil is like money, very scarce and quite treasured when it is found. The rocky soil in Jesus' parable is about how seeds go in between the rocks, but then they don't have enough good soil to set a strong root, so they never

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mature. In the Christian life, some of us make professions of Christ, are baptized, and are nurtured in the Christian way, but then something happens and we choose against the faith, and against the Church. Then, those roots that had begun, shrivel and die. The plant needed a little more good soil. We too also need to not be naïve about our faith, but that it is a struggle to continue to grow in what we believe. It is no longer taken for granted that people will be committed for life in the Church, or anything else. The vows we make to God for our whole lives mean that God wants to work in the gardens of our lives, clearing the rock, the gravel and the stones out of the way of our roots developing strong and firm in Him.

The third kind of soil is the thorny, weedy soil. It is another kind you see around town. Whatever weeds are prevalent and whichever ones take root, such as thistle and the like can take over a garden. And if we don't care enough about what's happening in the garden, those little tiny green leaves become big, ugly thorny weeds that do not allow any space for beautiful or tasty vegetables. But it takes time and energy to take out the weeds. It also is true that it is something, if we put it off, the bigger and uglier the weeds can get. This is true as well in our spiritual relationship with God and with others. If we do not address some of the problems we see cropping up in our relationships, whether it is with God or with another person, that problem can become such an awful patch of weeds that it destroys the whole garden. We can lose relationship with God, if we don't pay attention. We can lose relationship with our spouses and with our children and grandchildren and others, if we do not put the time and energy and love into them that we need to do.

So Jesus, the Master Gardener, looks at our soil and turns our minds to sweet receptivity to Himself. Let's agree to open ourselves anew today to Jesus, and say to Him, "Have your way in the soil of my heart, in your garden."

Wednesday, August 5

We're looking at the wonder of our gardens this week, our spiritual gardens. As we wonder about how to take care of our physical gardens during an outside water ban, so we should be even more concerned as to how to take

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care of our spiritual gardens, our very souls. So we have been opening ourselves up to the Master Gardener, Jesus Christ.

He knows best what we need. He knows we need water, and good soil. He also knows we need light, because He Himself is the Light.

John 8:12: When Jesus spoke again to the people, he said "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."

When we lived in British Columbia in the mountains, you had to be quite careful as to where you rented or bought a house or apartment. You could literally find places that because of being the shadow of tall mountains, and also being in the shadow of one hundred foot tall trees, you might not see the sunshine except a few hours per day. And that would be during the summer time. Some properties simply would not grow what you would expect because of living in the shadow lands.

It is the same in the garden of our hearts. We need to open ourselves to the Light of the World. Plants of every kind need a great deal of sun light. Human beings need the light of the Son of God. In Him, we have the growth and the warmth and the truth that we need.

The light exposes the dark things in our hearts and minds. It exposes the dark weeds in our gardens. To mix metaphors, if our very selves are houses, we need to give the keys of the house to the Lord. And then we need to invite the Lord into each room of the house. In some rooms, there are dark closets with memories and inappropriate thoughts, and hurtful words that need to be exposed to the light, so that we can hear the healing words of our Lord.

We invite the Lord into our families, into our relationships, into our past, into our neighborhoods, into our work, our recreation, wherever we are. In that place, in the light of Christ, we bring God's redemptive grace and we bring God's love. As we receive love, then we can give it away. As we receive truth and grace, we give them away.

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The light does not burn us, but opens up the buds of the flowers in our garden and exposes the wonderful array of colours within us, placed there by the Master. And we ask you, Lord, "Shine your light of life upon us. Open us anew to the marvels of your grace. Cause the growth you want in the gardens of our hearts, that we might praise and magnify you all our days."

And the light will dispel many of the pests that we experience in our gardens, that tend to be nocturnal, that is, only coming out at night. The bugs that eat our plants and really only are there to destroy what otherwise might be tend to shun the light. The light is there to expose their ways. Similarly, in the spiritual realm, there are those demonic forces that want to destroy us and make sure our lives are both miserable and unproductive. They desire that the garden bears no fruit, and no colour. But we do not have to give into the bugs, nor sit idly by while they devour the harvest. No, we can be wise in opening ourselves to the Light, day by day, relationship by relationship, as Jesus gives us grace.

Thursday August 6

We're in the garden of our lives this week with the Master Gardener Jesus teaching us what we need to learn to garden, both in times of drought and in times of plenty. We've looked at water and soil and light conditions in the garden. Now we will be looking at fertilizing.

Jesus told a parable about a tree in the garden this time, and it was a fig tree. Fresh figs are wonderful and you can even buy them in St. John's, if you look hard enough. But here is the parable from Luke 13:6ff.

Then Jesus told this parable: "A man had a fig tree growing in his vineyard, and he went to look for fruit on it but did not find any. So he said to the man who took care of the vineyard, 'For three years now I've been coming to look for fruit on this fig tree and haven't found any. Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?' 'Sir,' the man replied, 'leave it alone for one more year, and I'll dig around it and fertilize. If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down.'"

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The picture of a vineyard or garden or fruit tree that does not produce fruit is a metaphor for a person who has missed out on the purpose and reason for life. Each of us is a garden and we are meant to be viewed for the colour of the flowers and the wonder of the vegetables and fruit we produce in our lives.

In this particular story, the owner is tired of waiting for a fresh fig off of his tree, so he tells the gardener to cut it down. But the gardener, like Jesus, advocates for us who have very little fruit, if any on our branches. He says to give it a bit more time and to fertilize it, then see if fruit is produced.

And so if our lives are not producing fruit, that is, not serving others, not helping the community, not giving away of our lives to God and others, not promoting God's way and will, then God will allow the gardener to fertilize our garden. And you know what fertilizer is often made of, don't you?

Yes, it is often chicken manure, or cow paddies, or horse droppings or the like. Sometimes it is kelp or some composted plant material. But often it is plain and simply poop. God allows the poop in your life to fertilize the flowers, vegetables and fruit to produce that which is needed for ourselves, and our community. You wonder why so much poop comes into your life. This is something you can ask the Master about. There is some mystery in why the amounts of fertilizer are used in our lives, and why some seem to get so much more than others. And yet some gardens do produce such beautiful foliage and wonderful food. This comes at some cost to each of us. And the Lord himself knows about such cost.

Each of us has the Lord to dig around our roots and be nourished by the ingredients of the fertilizer, even if it seems unattractive or stinky. Once again, we are called to say "yes" to the Lord's activity in our life. "Produce your fruit in us, O God, the love, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness and self-control that comes from your Holy Spirit. Produce in us that fruit which will draw others to who you are."

Friday, August 7

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We've been looking this week at the garden as a picture of our spiritual selves. We have considered the watering of the garden, the soil condition, the need for light, for fertilizing, and today a word about weeding. Nobody likes to weed, or thin their vegetables. It used to kill me to take out all those little carrots and beets. Now we are starting to eat the beet tops and they are delicious. But weeding and thinning are necessary activities. Jesus told a parable about weeding, so I thought we might reflect today on this.

Matthew 13: 24 – 30 (TNIV). Jesus told them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field. But while everyone was sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and went away. When the wheat sprouted and formed heads, then the weeds also appeared. “The owner’s servants came to him and said, “Sir, didn’t you sow good seed in your field? Where then did the weeds come from?” ‘An enemy did this,’ he replied. “The servants asked him, ‘Do you want us to go and pull them up?’ ‘No,’ he answered, ‘because while you are pulling the weeds, you may uproot the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest. At that time I will tell the harvesters: First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned; then gather the wheat and bring it into my barn.’”

In this expedition to the garden, we realize the garden space is much larger than our own. It is the garden or fields of the Church. It is a place that has been planted with beautiful grain. But rather distrusting the good seed of the Gospel, when the weeds appear, we understand that in this garden, as in our private gardens, there is conflict. The weeds try to take over. They masquerade as the wheat, but in the end they shown to be what they truly are.

We have many conflicts in our churches. All of us in the churches are sinners like everyone else in the community. All of us in the churches are hypocrites, that is we don't practice exactly what we preach. And I believe it is the same in the community at large. None of us can escape that judgment. The good news in this parable is that all of us one day will give an account to God. All of us will face justice one day. And the justice of that judge will perfect and loving.

This should reassure us since we see the flaws of the church. This should reassure us when choose those priorities of the kingdom of heaven above the kingdoms and cultures of this world. This should help us when we want to seek revenge, to leave such in the hands of God.

The fields and gardens God gives us are wonderful. We have much to be thankful for. We need to appreciate the beauty of each garden God gives us, to take garden tours, to open ourselves to others, to confess our sins to one another, and to pray for one another for healing. We live in such a broken world. We need each other, we need to help each other. We need to clearly identify the good news Jesus brings us when we trust Him together.

I hope you have appreciated our garden tours this week. Should you like to revisit any of these messages, or if you missed any, don't hesitate to visit our web cite at www.stdavids.nf.ca in the services/sermon section.

I'm Jonathan Dent, Minister at St. David's Presbyterian Church, God bless you.