

“Good Soil”; part 2 of Lenten Series “Cultivating Discipleship”

Jeremiah 18: 1 – 6

March 12, 2017

Second Sunday in Lent

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A few years ago, my mother told me about a book that she had just read, wondered if I had read it too. The book was, “The Shack”. I said ‘no’ and the next their next visit to Lexington she handed me my very own copy. Sadly, while she was alive, I never got around to reading it. No, that’s not completely true. I tried a couple of times but could just not move past the first few chapters for a number of theological reasons. Then just a couple of weeks ago, while at the theater getting ready for ‘LaLaLand’ to start, the trailer “The Shack”, book now made into movie, came on...which made me pick up the book once more. This time I made it from cover to cover.

It would make a good book group read. I have to admit that I don’t resonate with every theological concept in the book. And yet, oh there are wonderful parts, like God appearing as a woman to the main character, Mac, because that’s just what Mac would least expect and God was about shaking up his learned religious expectations. Wonderful parts such as one of the many conversations with God who tells Mack about herself, that she is all about Love, that she is Love, that force of power that floats in and throughout the world. And the garden scene, for those of you who have read it, do you remember the garden scene? The Holy Spirit who has appeared in the form of a young Asian woman who is hard to grasp, shimmers in and out of view, takes Mac to a garden. As he rounds the corner and the garden comes into view he comes up short; it’s both beautiful and wild, not a garden of ordered rows and disciplined plants but fruit trees and flowers and vegetables and shrubs and vines all growing together in and among themselves. Mac calls it beautiful but also calls it a ‘mess’. Later, when they return to the shack after gardening, God and the Holy Spirit have a chuckle over Mac’s calling the garden a mess. “Why Mac”, says God, “that garden is your soul. And you are right. It’s beautiful and it’s a mess!”

This year in our 40 day Lenten journey we are about, as the theme reads, ‘cultivating discipleship’. It’s a journey of preparing our ‘gardens’ our souls, our innermost beings, to be receptive to God’s gift of Easter resurrection and new life. How do we turn toward God to make ourselves receptive to the seeds of grace that God plants not just on Easter but every day? What can we do to allow the way of Christ to grow within us, so that we may bear good fruit, so that we may be more Christ like?

Maybe it’s because Lent is in the Spring time when I am just aching to get out into my garden but for me our Lenten journey each year is filled with gardening metaphors. This time in the church calendar, it’s all about preparing our souls, about turning toward God, about making the space for transformation to occur. It’s about ‘soul gardening’.

Last week we began with weeds. You know, those metaphorical weeds within us that choke out the good growth in our lives, that take up space so that the seeds of fresh starts, of walking in the way of love and grace don’t have room to grow.

So, this week, after a lengthy introduction and synopsis of last week's gardening, we move on to soil. Dirt, good dirt, is important stuff for a garden to flourish!

In the book of Genesis, we remember that God created all and it all was good, was very, very good. And then God bent down, took a handful of adamah or earth and patted it and molded it and formed 'Adam' or mankind/humankind from adamah, the earth.

This metaphor of God shaping and molding us who are from the earth extends beyond the first Book of the Hebrew Scriptures. Both prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah use the image of God as potter, shaping us the clay. As cherished as this image may be, we can, unfortunately, take the metaphor only so far in this series of cultivation. There are a couple of problems.

First, in both Isaiah and Jeremiah, the metaphors were not directed to individuals but to the nation. The people of Israel had strayed and the words of the prophets were reminders for those people to turn back to God in the center of their lives or God would destroy and reshape the clay into something more useful. For the most part, in these Sundays of Lent, I am focusing more on our individual spiritual life. However, with all that is going on in our nation today, it may be useful for us to set aside some time during the week to personally reflect on how these metaphors encompass not only us as individuals but also as a church community and as a nation.

Another problem with using the potter image in the larger garden metaphor is that, well, clay may be OK for a potter to use but it's not good soil for a garden. Believe me, I learned that the first year we moved to Kentucky and I tried to turn over the dirt/clay to plant. Hard as a rock, would not break up but stayed clumped together. Not good gardening soil!

Still, Jeremiah's theme of the transformative power of God in our lives, that desire to shape us and mold us if we allow it, flows over into our gardening theme. 'Turn now', says the Lord, 'all of you from the ways that are not of God, and amend your ways and your doings.'

"Amend": to make changes, to make better, to improve.

As in what any gardener in Kentucky has to do if the desire is to have anything grow in the garden except the weeds that are adapted to the hardy Kentucky clay. We add organic material; leaves and compost and for me, the wood shavings and extra from my chicken coop each time I clean it out. We add and we turn, mixing in trying to break up that hard Kentucky clay so that seeds may grow.

There is a parallel here as we go about the work of 'soul gardening'. All throughout scripture we read of people with 'hardened hearts'. Hardened just like Kentucky clay, filled with bitterness or resentment, cynicism, hatred; so, hardened that they are not able to live lives of grace and gratitude. Their 'soil' needs to be amended.

Our soil needs to be amended. 'Amend your ways' says God. Turn toward God. This season of Lent is a time to take notice of the condition of the soil in our life garden, adding nutrients;

prayer, worship, walks in nature, surrounding ourselves with community; all of that in life which breaks up that hardened way of being.

This week I turned over the amended soil in my garden beds and planted seeds for early Spring. The package says the seeds should sprout in 8 to 10 days but I won't be seeing any progress for a couple of weeks due to this cold snap. The soil needs to be a certain temperature, needs to be warmed up, before any seed can sprout.

As we reflect on our 'soul garden', as we do the work of cultivating discipleship, we need to pay attention to the temperature of our soil. "Hardened hearts and cold hearts", different words for the same thing; lack of receptivity for God's love and grace to take hold in our lives.

And finally, one more metaphor.

There is a quote that speaks of gardening wisdom, both literal gardening and 'soul gardening'. It reads: "Soil that is not allowed to rest is fertile ground for weeds." Our daily lives are so busy. Even those of you who are retired, I hear from you that you are busier now than before. And now, especially in this time in our country, there is so much work to be done. We try to stand for the most vulnerable find ourselves being pulled in so many directions; to stand with and support refugees, people of other faiths, those who are terrified that they may lose their health care, those protecting the environment and the list goes on. "Soil that is not allowed to rest is fertile ground for weeds." Rest. Quiet. Just listening. "Be still and know".

As we go about the work of 'soul gardening' this Lenten season, may this be our prayer, 'that our heart be good soil, open to the seed of God's word and way.'

Amen.