

## **The Constant Gardener**

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Texts: Hosea 10:12-13; Galatians 6:7-10; Matthew 7:15-20

One of my favorite resurrection stories is from John 20, where Mary meets the risen Jesus for the first time. She doesn't recognize him, she thinks he is the gardener. Why a gardener? Was he bent over with his hands in the ground? Was he dressed like a gardener, was he carrying a shovel? It's not the first image we have of Jesus stooped over, with his hands in the soil...earlier in the gospel of John when the woman was caught in adultery, we see Jesus bending down playing in the earth.

I like the image of God as gardener, because I have spent a lot of time gardening. And scripture is permeated with this image. The very first story in the Bible has God making a garden for Adam and Eve. And Jesus told so many stories about seeds, and weeds, and vines and fruit. In the gospel of John, Jesus says that God is the gardener, or the vine-grower, depending on your translation (John 15:1).

God as a gardener is a good image for us today, as we head into spring and as we head into our annual meeting later today. I want us to think about God as the Constant Gardener, and about our commitment to gardening together with God.

Our call to worship was from Hosea. He walks through the garden of Israel and catalogues all the plants he sees. You have sown wickedness, and now you will reap heartbreak and exile. You have planted idolatry and now you are reaping estrangement from God. You have sown the wind, and now you will reap the whirlwind (Hosea 8:7). Hosea says, "Sow for yourselves righteousness, reap steadfast love; break up your fallow ground; for it is time to seek the Lord, that he may come and rain righteousness upon you" (Hosea 10:12). As far as Hosea is concerned, Israel is oblivious to the fruit they are harvesting. God, the Master Gardener, has sent Hosea to remind them, "Hey what are you doing to my garden?"

Did Israel listen to the gardening advice given by the prophet Hosea? Unfortunately, no. They thought they knew what they were doing.

Jesus came with a similar message from God. He gives pointed observations about what he sees being planted, and the fruit that is being harvested. He is especially direct with the religious leaders. You are sowing legalism and exclusion; is this bearing good fruit in the life of Israel? He encourages the common people to see the fruit they are eating...to judge it for themselves. Is it bitter? Then you'd better change what you are planting. If you want to get a different harvest, you have to sow different seeds. Jesus encouraged people to plant righteousness, to bear good fruit; he showed us how.

We also read a passage from Paul's letter to the church in Galatia. Again the same message. You will reap what you sow. Don't grow weary, Paul says, in doing what is right, because the harvest will be worth it. I am struck especially by verse 10: "So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith"(Galatians 6:10). The family of faith is where we have the best opportunity to garden together, to use our collective wisdom as we sow and harvest together. Will we listen to each other? Will we give and receive counsel from our brothers and sisters?

I gardened a large backyard for 20 years. And I learned exactly what these scriptures are saying, "You reap what you sow." And I confess I sowed some very stupid things.

Like the time I planted Chinese Lanterns. I got them at a plant exchange with some girlfriends. They looked lovely. My friend was enthusiastic and said two things about this plant. She said, "It will grow anywhere," and she said, "You can't kill it." I planted it and it did grow anywhere, it spread a bit the first year, a bit more vigorously the second year, by the third year it was everywhere. Chinese lanterns spring up early, and shade out anything below it; they form a carpet of Chinese Lanterns, where nothing else can survive. You try to pull the plant up, and its roots are very brittle, they snap...so you get the plant but not the roots. After a year or two of pulling and pulling this plant out, I decided to avoid that part of my yard. "Maybe they will just die out by themselves," I thought. That turned out not to be a good plan. My neighbor started becoming alarmed when it spread through a privet hedge and a fence into his grass. So I decided to get serious. I dug up the whole back garden to the depth of a foot, and sifted out the long white roots. This was an enormous amount of backbreaking work, it involved lifting up all my other perennials. And guess what? That strategy did not work. If anything, the Chinese lanterns seemed more vigorous the next year. They apparently like root pruning.

Another stupid thing I planted was Morning Glories. I planted them the very first year we moved in to the house. I'd always loved the look of morning glories, and so as soon as we were home owners, the first seeds I bought were Morning Glories Two packages of seeds. I remember Eugene saw the seeds on the kitchen table. He looked at me significantly and asked in a serious tone of voice, 'Are you sure you want to plant Morning Glories, they can get out of control!' "I'll just plant them by the back fence, it will be no problem," I said confidently. The next day he asked me again, saying, "I really don't think planting Morning Glories is a good idea." "They're so beautiful," I said. He responded, "As long as you know what you're doing!" "Oh, yes," I said, (famous last words) "I know what I'm doing!"

Again the first year was sweet, a few Morning Glories on the back fence. The next year, all over the fence. The year after that, all over the cedar trees, all over the raspberries, all over the tiger lilies, all over the rhododendrons. I had not counted on Morning Glories self-seeding themselves. They grew in a galloping way, twining around every living thing in the backyard. Covering them, choking them, strangling all my other plants. The only thing they didn't kill was the Chinese Lanterns.

I became a constant gardener. I worked and worked, hacking these plants back, pulling them up by the roots. Year after year, I can't tell you how many hours I spent working against these invasive plants.

Through all this hard work, over and over I would be confronted with the sorry fact that I, with my own hands, had planted Chinese Lanterns and Morning Glories. You reap what you sow. The words rang in my ears, “They’ll grow anywhere. You can’t kill them. Are you sure you know what you are doing?” It took me five minutes to plant these and years of backbreaking work to try and get rid of them. Bitter fruit indeed.

Eugene, being the horticulturalist that he is, said he had a permanent solution for this, called Roundup, that would also kill every other living thing in my garden. But that was too drastic for me. I had too many beloved perennials. I sympathized with the farmer in the parable that Jesus told, that’s recorded in Matthew 13. The wheat and tares were growing together in a field, and the farmer says, “Let them grow together until the harvest.” Except in that story it was an enemy that planted the tares. In my garden, I was my own worst enemy!

When I got the call to come to Lendrum, much as it was hard to leave the home where we raised our kids, part of me was relieved that I could leave my botanical catastrophes behind and start a new garden. Have you seen the show *Life After People*, where they imagine what the world would look like in 25 years if people disappeared? If people disappear, I know exactly what Vineland will look like. Wall to wall Chinese Lanterns and Morning Glories.

I have become a much more cautious gardener, before I plant anything I ask people about the plant and if anyone says the word invasive, I don’t touch it with a ten foot pole. I take the advice of master gardeners more seriously. And there is lots of advice to be had. We can ask questions. We can talk to people about their gardens, about what works and what doesn’t work.

Because of these traumatic gardening experiences, I am particularly tuned to the scriptures we heard today. And as a pastor, I see the garden as a good metaphor for our own lives, and the work God is doing in our church.

Our lives are like gardens. Let me tell you about Ivy. Ivy is not a real person, but a compilation of the stories of numerous people I’ve met. Ivy grew up in a good Christian home. She was taught at a young age, by her parents, not to lie. But when I met her, her whole life was falling apart because she was addicted to lying.

How did this happen? It was a long slow process. Ivy never set out saying, “I want to ruin my life by lying,” but lying was something that she planted in a few small ways in her life, and the lies grew and grew.

Her mother asked her, “Did you talk to your sister on her birthday?” “I tried calling, but no one was home.” There were things she didn’t like to do at work. To get out of them she’d say, “I’m busy exactly at that time, sorry, I have another meeting scheduled.” She wanted to buy something for herself, but she knew her husband wouldn’t approve. So easy to open another account that he didn’t know about, and put extra money in it each week.

Ivy was fascinated by how lying could help avoid conflict. Lies seemed to be almost magical, as magical as Jack’s beanstalk beans. She would say a lie, and she would instantly avoid trouble. She could get exactly what she wanted.

Ivy was a very smart person, so she was a good liar. She was pretty careful about lying so that people wouldn't be able to figure out that she was lying. She used her intelligence to keep track of all the lies she told. And lies were self-seeding, whenever she told a lie, she often had to tell more lies to cover up the earlier lie.

Over the years, she became so good at lying and it was working so well for her that she became more bold and adventurous in her lying. It was a game, a fun game, and she could laugh at how she was fooling everyone around her. She liked the element of danger.

Lies, lies, lies. When she didn't want to talk to people it was, "My cellphone ran out of batteries, and I didn't realize it, so I didn't get your calls." At home she said, "Sorry, I can't go to the family reunion, I have to work that day." At work she said, "Sorry, I can't take that work assignment because we have a family reunion that day." Or she told her husband, "I have a conference I have to go to, I'll be gone for three days."

She had started corresponding with an old boyfriend on Facebook. So easy to make up a new email address, that only she knew about it. They corresponded, they talked. They planned a weekend together. Because Ivy was so good at lying, she was confident that this would just be another secret part of her life that no one else needed to know about.

Yes, Ivy had a conscience. Yes, she remembered what she had been taught about lying. She went to church every week and knew what her community stood for. Yes, in principle, lying was bad. She hated it when people lied to her. But she had a good reason for lying. Things weren't so good at home, she was so stressed out, she needed these things, these people, this part of her life to cope with everyday life. And besides, she told herself, everyone lies about things sometimes.

She got to the point where she truly believed the lies she was telling herself. In a twisted way, she actually came to believe that her lies were what was keeping her marriage together. She didn't want to hurt anyone, and as long as she kept lying, she was protecting people. She was lying to save her marriage, she was lying to keep her children from getting hurt.

By the time I met Ivy, lies were so entwined in her life, lies were blanketing her life so completely, that she didn't know how to have an honest relationship with anyone. She was entirely isolated, she wasn't being honest with anyone; not her spouse, not her children, not herself, not God. And it was taking more and more of her energy to keep juggling all the lies she had in the air at one time.

And you can guess what happens next. She drops one ball. One statement left out from a secret credit card.

There was a moment of truth, where “Yes, this is what is happening.” Deep, harrowing conversations where the state of the union is discussed. Enormous pain, anger, betrayal. The house of cards comes crashing down, as layer after layer of lies surface. And remorse. Sorrow. Ivy thought she was just lying to her spouse, but everyone she knew felt betrayed, her parents, her friends. She sees how lying has strangled everything vital in her life. Ivy decides, “I’m turning over a new leaf. Honesty is the best policy.”

There were moments of truth for Ivy. She truly wanted to change. But the roots of lying were very deep inside her. She couldn’t always keep her resolution, and now people were watching and double checking everything she said. They called her on her lies, they held her accountable. She began to get resentful. “Why don’t people trust me?” She is angry at the hard work of digging, and rooting out the lies in her life. What does the future hold for Ivy?

Ivy’s story is very dramatic; but I know I can relate to it. There are things each of us have planted in our lives that have grown in startling and disruptive ways. Things that are much harder to root out than we would ever have imagined.

I could tell Linden’s story of being a workaholic, always putting his work over his family. Or Iris whose drinking habit twisted into every part of her life. Or Reed who found his life blanketed with the desire to watch on-line pornography. Or Heather who was so critical of everyone and everything that she blighted every important relationship in her life. Or Leif who loved money over everything. So many invasive sins in the one garden we have responsibility for, the only garden we will ever have in this life. We planted something stupid. We didn’t read the manual, or we didn’t believe it when scripture or our family or friends told us—the love of money is the root of all evil, keep yourselves pure, love one another, or don’t indulge in drunkenness. We think we are the exception, we can plant these beautiful Jack in the Beanstalk seeds and never face the consequences.

This is where the image of God as a Constant Gardener comes in. God knows every stupid thing we’ve planted. God knows what kind of fruit we are eating, and the effect it is having on us. Unfortunately there is no such thing as spiritual Roundup, that blasts everything evil out of our lives, that withers the sin in us instantly. No magic answers. Jesus is a Saviour with his hands in the dirt, our dirt. God is willing to be a Constant Gardener, helping us with the digging, the rooting around, the ripping out, the discarding.

God has hope for us, And God knows the soil we each have to work with, because God gave us that soil. God knows a beautiful garden is possible in each of our lives, even in the most weed-infested soil. God has a whole new set of seeds. Patience, kindness, goodness, humility. God has a vision of what our lives can be; healthy habits bringing forth good fruit. God never turns away in disgust. We see Jesus digging in the dirt at the trial of a prostitute, we see him not turning away from a man enmeshed in the corrupt life of a tax collector. He extends a hand to Nicodemus, a leader of the Pharisees. This garden can be born again.

This is where the church, the family of faith, comes in. The church should be a place where we can talk frankly about our own gardens, the stupid things we’ve planted, the beautiful garden we long for. How it takes constant hard work.

And think of Ivy. How do we live with Ivy as a sister in Christ? How do you encourage her in her gardening, how do you have patience when you see her sowing lies again? It's easy as a church to move away, to say, "We can't deal with this mess. Come back when you're less messed up." Are we willing to walk with people as they do the hard digging in their life? Too often we walk away; we sow seeds of perfectionism, of abandonment and neglect.

The church is a garden, our family of faith is a communal garden plot. We are going into an annual meeting today. What kind of seeds do we sow at our meetings together? Can we speak with goodwill, good humour, kindness? Can we do that even when we have hard things to talk about? Sometimes it's so tempting to blurt out our anger, our suspicion, our grumpiness. One irritated comment is such a tiny seed, it takes just a few seconds to plant it. But every word we speak is a seed that can grow. Irritation is self seeding. You plant your irritation, and the next person thinks, "Well, if they can talk that way, I can talk that way too." If you've spent time trying to hack away the hurt feelings from words misspoken in public, you know that it is wiser to be cautious. To listen to the gardening advice from scripture, "Peacemakers who sow in peace, reap a harvest of righteousness" (James 3:18).

Most importantly, an annual meeting is a time to take a step back and look at the big garden picture. What is God trying to sow in the world? How can we here at Lendrum help with that harvest of righteousness? What seeds are we planting in our city, and in our country, and around the world through the organizations we support? We would like to see a harvest of peace, a harvest of justice, a harvest of reconciliation. Are we supporting organizations that plant seeds like that?

I invite you over lunch, to talk to one another about the gardens of our lives. Is there something you can clearly say you regret planting that has been hard to weed out of your life? How does our church community help? What vision do you have for our communal garden?

We come to the communion table today with humility and repentance, knowing that we have weedy gardens. We come to the communion table today with hope, knowing that God is the Constant Gardener, and that this community will help us. Together, we worship the one with a grand botanical vision for all of planet earth.