



SERMON 829

Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany

February 16, 2014

933rd Week as Priest

759th Week at St Dunstan's

24th Week at Epiphany-Tallassee

GOD'S GARDEN

Grace to you, and peace, from God our Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

I have chosen purposely not to talk about the passage from Matthew's Gospel. It is filled with advice on debt, marriage, adultery, divorce, anger, murder, and the like. If you want to learn more, watch the next episode of your favorite reality show.

But as for me and my people, let's talk instead about Paul's good advice to the new church in Corinth. He is addressing the community on the nature of their being together.

He has spoken of the need for unity and common purpose, and now he provides a metaphor that is most useful for us. “You are God’s field,” says Paul ... or in other translations of the passage ... “you are God’s *farm*,” and “you are God’s *garden*.”

I’m confident that the image of God’s garden brings to your mind the Garden of Eden, a place of paradise, filled with all kinds of flowering plants, vegetables to cultivate and eat, good work to do together, and over all, a sense of God’s abiding presence and perfect goodness. That would be nice, wouldn’t it, if the church were really like that garden? But you recall that the human beings were driven out of that garden, as the direct result of their own sin and rebellion.

No, the garden which is the church is something different. Paul describes a process whereby the leaders plant the seeds and water them, but they have no ownership or special privilege. Their work is essential and important, surely, but they simply work for God. It is God who brings forth growth in this garden.

The prophet Isaiah assures us that the Lord will guide us continually, and satisfy our needs in parched places, and make our bones strong; and we shall be like *a watered garden*. In a later passage, Isaiah says,

For as the earth brings forth its shoots, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up, so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations.

So the Church as a garden is not a place of perfection, rather a process of becoming—and it requires our common toil, our selfless devotion,

and our shared vision. A garden neglected grows to weeds, and a garden well-loved and well-tended yields much fruit. Likewise, a garden must be made and re-made with the passing seasons and years. And those who work in garden are always learning something new—sometimes by close observation and practice, and sometimes by trial and error.

Rudyard Kipling wrote, “Our England is a garden, and such gardens are not made by singing: ‘Oh, how beautiful!’ and sitting in the shade.” So, mostly, I think that successful gardening comes from work, hard work. These lessons are valuable for the church, as well.

We have a beautiful property for the Episcopal Church of the Epiphany, and although it is a daunting task to cut the grass for six months out of the year, it is truly a blessing. In ancient Israel, the concept of blessing was always understood in a material, down-to-earth sense. Blessing meant possessions, children, and land.

The psalmist said, “My boundaries enclose a pleasant land; indeed, I have a goodly heritage.”

You certainly have a pleasant land, and a goodly heritage. Your leaders, your wardens and vestry, and the entire congregation, have done a superb job of caring for this garden. The church building is both beautiful and completely paid for. You owe nothing but love for God and one another. You have brought into being an Episcopal Church in an area where there was not one, and you have done so with a great deal of generosity, faith, and hard work.

My question for you this day as we begin our twentieth year as the Episcopal Church in Tallassee is this: What will we become as God's garden, and how will this good and pleasant land serve the Kingdom of God?

There are many possibilities, you know ...

You have plans for a parish hall with Sunday School rooms and offices.

At some point, you may decide that a parking lot is needed.

Perhaps the Little House will be moved, or removed completely, or replaced by a new building or structure.

You have plenty of room for a day school, or a community garden, or a labyrinth.

Maybe Jim Scott should come and design a churchyard for us, with Japanese maple trees and flowerbeds.

The memorial garden on the hill is a place of beauty and serenity; what will become of it over the next twenty years?

Perhaps God's garden in Tallassee is not a literal garden or churchyard, but rather a place of peace, a garden of prayer, a walking path and a sanctuary for people who are on a spiritual journey.

It could be that God's garden here is a continuing ministry to feed the hungry with Beans & Rice, or a Thrift Store to provide clothing for the needy.

Or it could be that, with the construction of the new Wal-Mart Super Center, all we need be is an open field, an undeveloped green space surrounded by stores and parking lots and the busy-ness of everyday life.

Whatever God's garden is to be in our midst, I hope and pray that we seek the will and purpose of God in all that we do.

We are only those who plant and water the garden. It is God who gives the growth. We are called to work together for the Kingdom, to celebrate the joy and wonder of God's creation, and to worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness. When we do these things together, in a spirit of love and cooperation, then our life together will be blessed.
AMEN.

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