

Sermon for Proper 22A  
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It's all about gardens, isn't it? Gardens and vineyards. Throughout the Bible, most of the major faith events take place in gardens and vineyards.

It starts in a garden. God says to Adam and Eve, "Here you are—a lovely garden to live in and take care of. Everything you need is here, and I will be here also. Just leave this one tree alone . . ." And you know what happens . . . They eat the fruit, boom, they're kicked out of the garden. Abram and Sarai are called out of the lush area of the Tigris and Euphrates to go and settle in the land of Canaan. Joseph saves his family by becoming steward over the fertile farms and gardens of Egypt; four hundred years later, the Hebrew people find their paradise turned into a prison. They are led out of slavery in that garden place into the desert and eventually back into Canaan.

Jesus uses parables about gardens and vineyards to teach his listeners. Today's rather harsh words are about a landowner who planted and tended a vineyard, then leased it out to tenants and went away. All the landowner expected from the tenants was that they would give him his share of the produce each year. But the tenants were greedy, and were hostile to the landowner's servants who came to collect—they beat some, stoned others, and killed others. And when the landowner sent his son, they also killed him. The question of the parable is, "What will that landowner do to those wicked tenants?"

This parable is about the relationship between God and God's people. God entrusted them with his land and goods, and only required that they give him back his due—thanksgiving, love, and worship. But, being people, they refused. And when God sent his servants, the prophets, to call them back into right relationship to God, the people ignored, beat, or murdered them. Then Jesus predicts his own death; when God sends his own Son, he too will be killed. In this parable, Jesus is talking about the Jews, the chosen people of God. The answer to the parable's question is that God will take away the kingdom from the Jews, the chosen ones, and give it away to Gentiles, pagans. That is why the temple authorities are enraged when they hear the parable.

There is another way to listen to this parable today, in the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. We too are the people of God, grafted into the chosen people through Jesus Christ. We are the tenants of God's vineyard and bounty; like the tenants in the parable we aren't very good keepers of the vineyard. We may love and worship God a bit, but mostly we tend to fall away, being greedy and willful. And worse than the tenants in the story, not only do we not bear good fruit, we have managed to trash the vineyard, destroying the very garden God made and tended.

Global warming is an established fact—the effects of global warming are experienced in every part of the globe. Disappearing glaciers and polar ice, rising sea levels, dying coral reefs, extreme weather patterns—these are leading to species extinctions, catastrophic storms and floods, draught, disease, and suffering, especially among the poorest and most vulnerable peoples.

We have also despoiled God's garden through our pollution of it. We pollute through smokestacks and auto emissions, from the use of heavy metals and radioactive materials, and from the 80- to 100,000 chemicals put into use since World War II. These chemicals are in pesticides, herbicides, cleaners, paints, personal care products, furniture, clothing, rugs, cars, appliances, electronics—you name it—and these chemicals pollute during their manufacture, their use, and their disposal. We have trashed God's garden.

This is precisely because we have acted like those tenants in the parable. We forgot our place and our relationships. We acted as if we were the owner—and a pretty irresponsible one. We forgot God, we forgot that we are part of the garden, we refused to be thankful and loving and worshipful. We refused to use the vineyard for good, for God. We neglected to care for the vineyard and also for the other tenants using it, the other people on this earth.

We have rejected, loudly rejected, the prophets who have said to us, "Stop! Don't do this! Global warming is real! Stop consuming and polluting!" Prophets like Jimmy Carter and Al Gore and Bill McKibben. It's only recently anyone started paying attention.

Now, what will God do to us? Give the earth to someone else? Aliens? Cockroaches?

It's interesting that in Europe, there is a movement to recreate community. People looked around and realized that they need to work together to create real community life and become environmentally sustainable. So they are forming what they call "transition towns," and becoming trained in community-building functions like how to care for people, and how to reach out to the vulnerable and how to forgive. All the things that churches know about, or should know about. These transition towns get it, and they understand that they must respect and take care of God's creation. These are not religious groups. Can it be that God has given his vineyard over to these people, because we haven't stepped up to the challenge?

The end of the story, however, isn't just here at the end of the parable. Jesus was in Jerusalem in the temple when he told the parable. Soon he would end up in two more gardens, and that's where the end of the story is revealed. In the Garden of Gethsemane, where he was betrayed, arrested by the temple police, and where his disciples deserted him and denied him. God has the last word in the garden where Jesus' crucified body was laid to rest. There, Mary Magdalene encounters the resurrected Jesus, according to the Gospel of John. It's interesting that she mistakes him for the gardener, the true gardener of the vineyard.

The end of the story is resurrection, hope, forgiveness. While God could just smite us all for willfully destroying so much of the Creation, our God chooses instead to forgive us and love us. To give us yet another chance.

It's too late to prevent global warming. It's too late not to pollute. But it's not too late to try to reverse global warming, and to do our best to clean up the earth. What can we do?

Become educated. Learn with open eyes what it is that we have done, so that we can turn and repent. Pray. Work together with others, other churches, other faiths, people with no particular faith. Care for the least among us who are probably the most affected. Pray. The Massachusetts Council of Churches has been developing resources for use in churches on the topic of environmental health and environmental justice. Use the resources, get active, advocate for change.

I leave you with another image of a garden. When my daughters were small, we found that one of my twins had severe food allergies. The pediatrician advised us to buy and use as much organic food as we could, to reduce the burden on her body. So I joined an organic farm, the Many Hands Organic Farm, and worked for several years there as a working share holder. I would work 4 hours a week on the farm, and in exchange I received a share of the produce.

There were a number of us who worked on the farm. We would gather early in the morning; we would weed and harvest food. We always had animated conversations about everything—politics, religion, the world, children. Julie, the farmer, wasn't overtly religious, but participated in all the discussions. After a while passed, when I came I would take off my shoes and let my feet sink into the rich nurturing earth. During the morning Julie would often bring out homemade cookies to share with the workers, and sometimes we were invited in for lunch. Even if I started out in a bad mood, after a few hours with the others, with the soil and the plants and the work and the sun, I would find myself restored.

This garden was a true place of healing, of restoration, of creating and nurturing not only wonderful food but beautiful relationships. Julie wouldn't call herself a Christian, but she gets it. She is doing what we're supposed to be doing. And recently, she has taken on using ex-convicts on the farm, to help nurture them in relationships and teach them useful skills, while allowing them to experience the restorative work in God's creation. She's doing it. Why aren't we?

We are invited to jump in, to care for Creation, to participate in reclaiming our true place as God's tenants. We can do this! Let us pray. AMEN.