

Next week is the first work day for the new West Plains Community Garden, in which I've joined and requested a plot. Many agencies are working together on this, and offering the first plot free, unless a person intends to sell the produce. Folks of all ages and all experience levels were at the meeting last month, so it ought to be a lot of fun. There are many purposes behind this, including addressing hunger & nutritional needs of folks at the margins. At the first meeting, a couple of the leaders sidled up to me to ask how many plots First Pres was taking – I hadn't thought about that, I was just getting a plot for me to have fun in and get dirty in, and maybe get some fresh tomatoes and beans – although we have a great farm market, so maybe it's more about getting in the dirt.

I've gardened in some capacity since my seminary days, and had fig trees a couple times, although mine were prolific – I just had to beat the birds to the figs. But pruning in any dimension has always been difficult for me. I mean, I read the gardening journals and know that plants need so many inches for optimal growth. Usually one plants the seeds a bit closer initially, and you thin them after you see how many actually sprout, maybe eat the thinning. Actually, sometimes folks sell their thinning, like sweet potato slips or collards for example. But I have a terrible time thinning – I usually try and re-plant the little lettuces, and sometimes they make it and other times not – but at least I tried. Instructions for the multi-pak starters say plant two seeds, and cut off the weaker one. I usually try and save them, too. I know the plant won't flourish without enough room; and I know fruit trees will bear better if they are pruned.

This story Jesus tells has always hit me funny, because I just have a difficult time thinking God would give up on someone, or a people. I think of how in the prophet Hosea, God keeps coming back and coming back, despite everything. It's pictured as Hosea continuing to seek out and take back his straying wife, who keeps leaving him and returning to her street job. I think of how Jesus prayed on the cross, "Forgive them, for they know not what they do." I think of that core verse, John 3:16-17, where Jesus says God didn't send Jesus to condemn the world, but to save it.

The interpretation thing, however, is to see God less as the Master who wants to summarily chop down the fruitless tree, and more as the gardener who pleads for just a little more time to nurture it, fertilize it, amend the soil, cut back where needed – all the things that WILL make it into a fruitful tree. Seeing God as the one who impersonally says, ‘Off with their heads’ is based more in our fears of a punitive deity, and makes us more into those who try and appease the deity’s wrath as groveling penitents. I don’t think that’s the Christian view of God.

I do think, however, that these passages like we read today can be warnings. I mean, not to take God’s grace for granted. I do feel that if God can’t get something done with a certain person, then God will use someone else, and they will get the blessings of doing God’s will. I feel we can hold out or say “No” and miss out. While God loves us, God does have certain things to accomplish. I think. After all, there are multiple verse I could quote about the Day of Judgment, and Jesus told stories about separating true believers from false. The way the ancient Israelites interpreted their history was to see their unbelief and falling away followed by being defeated militarily, taken into captivity. And they called then for repentance and return to faith, which was rewarded with returning to their land. That was underneath the whole Messianic expectation, which Jesus’ disciples had such a hard time letting go. Peter asked, at the end of Jesus’ life, “Lord, will you at this restore Israel?” It wasn’t just Judas who misunderstood.

Let’s look at judgment a minute. I think judgment is somehow a case of natural consequences, which I read about and attempted to us as a parenting technique. I mean, if you don’t get your paper in on time, you won’t get the A. Or the B. Or the C. In college, we used to jokingly call exam week The Day of Judgment, because if we hadn’t done our work, it was going to show. If we don’t pull the weeds, our plants will still grow, but not as well. If we know we have diabetes and still eat a whole carton of ice cream, there will be consequences. If we try and run a 5K without building up to it, we won’t, to put it mildly, do our best. If you don’t get your vehicle inspection in the right month, you can get a ticket. If you don’t pay your parking tickets, they won’t renew your license. If you live in the age of hunger/gatherers and you don’t kill a deer or plant your corn, you and the tribe will go hungry.

In many ways, its simple.

In terms of God, there are some natural consequences, too. If we don't discipline ourselves to a prayer life, we won't have one, and when we do sit down to pray, we'll have to learn how. If we give in to anger all the time, it will affect our testimony in the world as a lack of compassion, and eventually show up in our bodies. If we don't practice an awareness of the Spirit, it will be hard to hear that still, small voice speak in our heart. In the Lord's Prayer we say weekly, we say, "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." Forgiveness flows in all kinds of directions – if it flows.

Fortunately, however, our God is a gardener. It's been my experience, and the experience of many, many others, that God gives another opportunity to hear and learn if we miss the first one - and another – and another. God wants us to be transformed into the image of Jesus Christ, God wants us to bear fruit, God wants us to mature, God wants us to live in that kingdom of lovingkindness. And God continues to call, to prune, to nurture, to amend, to do whatever it takes to pull us along. Some of us take longer and more effort, OK, I know that.

In the end, we are God's garden, God is our gardener, and pleads for us to have another chance. May this Lenten season be a time when God works deeply in the soil of our hearts and lives, calls us closer, and transforms us more and more into what we are meant to be. AMEN.