

May 27, 2018

“Summer Fun: Gardening”

2 Corinthians 9: 8-12

Matthew 13: 1-9

All biblical quotes are from the *Common English Bible* unless otherwise indicated.

When I was growing up, we had a neighbor across the alley named Wilbur Erickson. He was a character. He was also our high school biology teacher. He enjoyed saying things like, “Miss Smick, please rise to a perpendicular position, traverse the atmosphere of this classroom, and extinguish the illumination!” Which meant go turn out the lights.

He also liked to eat strange things for the entertainment of children. In the classroom, he was famous for eating the raw liver we were using for a lab experiment. In the neighborhood, when he went fishing, he would eat the eyeballs of the fish if there were enough kids around.

Mr. Erickson was a gardener, but thwarted by his very small yard. We, on the other hand had a home that sat on four lots—a huge yard. One summer he asked my parents if he could garden on it, and thus began many summers of bounty.

Mr. Erickson wasn’t a neat gardener—our yard always looked like a vegetable jungle—but he was productive. Zucchini, okra, peppers, beets, tomatoes and some things I couldn’t recognize came pouring out by the middle of summer. He always shared with us generously. What a blessing to receive fresh veggies for free, delivered right to your back door!

Coming from rural Palestine of 2000 years ago, we shouldn’t be surprised that Jesus and biblical authors were also familiar with gardening. Everyone understood the basic mechanics of it, which is probably why it’s a frequent Biblical metaphor. Most people were poor, and depended on what they could raise, grow or gather for food. Having even a small plot of land outside their door could be the difference between hungry and fed. So hear these words from 2 Corinthians 9: 8-12:

God has the power to provide you with more than enough of every kind of grace. That way, you will have everything you need always and in everything to provide more than enough for every kind of good work. As it is written, *He scattered everywhere; he gave to the needy; his righteousness remains forever.*

The one who supplies seed for planting and bread for eating will supply and multiply your seed and will increase your crop, which is righteousness. You will be made rich in every way so that you can be generous in every way. Such generosity produces thanksgiving to God through us. Your ministry of this service to God’s people isn’t only fully meeting their needs but it is also multiplying in many expressions of thanksgiving to God.

There are several take-aways from this gardening metaphor. First, it makes clear that God is the provider. The seed comes from him, and he sows it. I take the seed to be us, the opportunities that he gives us for growth and service, and the future of hope he plans for us. To grow in faith and discipleship is our calling. You remember Roman 5: 3-5:

...we know that trouble produces endurance, endurance produces character, and character produces hope. This hope doesn't put us to shame, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.

And Hebrews 6: 1:

So let's press on to maturity, by moving on from the basics about Christ's word...

There is then, an expectation that we won't remain seeds! Seeds are made to grow, and so are we.

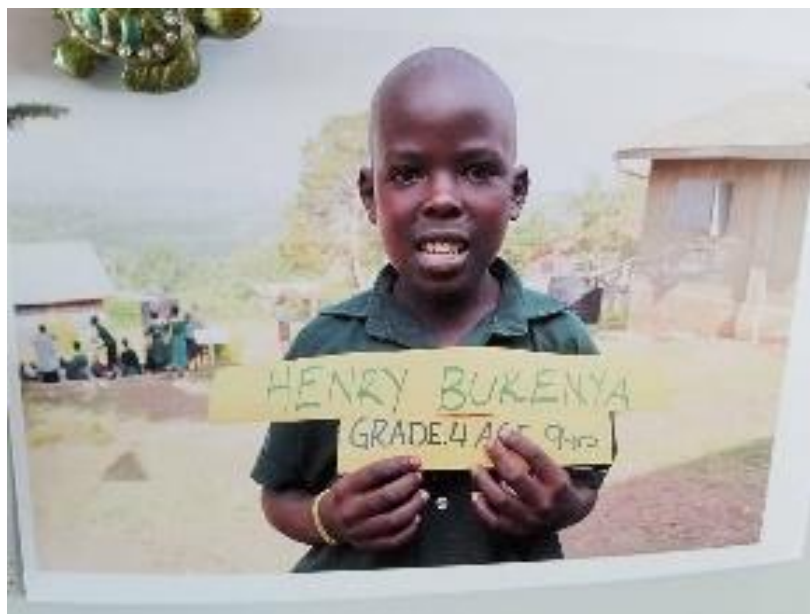
Fortunately, our scripture tells us that God gives us what we need for this growth. He gives us gifts, such as healing, hospitality, wisdom, faith, and leadership that prepare us to be of service. And once we are in service, he gives us knowledge, skills, confidence, perseverance, and hope. Most importantly, he gives us his Holy Spirit. The Spirit working within and among us makes our service not just something we do, but something that sheds the love and grace of God as we do it. We become God's agents, God's hands and feet, doing God's will in our congregation and community. Visiting a shut-in, working at the soup kitchen, or cleaning up trash, Jesus Christ is alive and active in you!

And not only is Jesus working through us, but he is multiplying what we do. God takes what we have and what we offer, and makes it *more* by his grace. Like a seed that begins tiny and grows to produce an abundance, God takes our offerings and produces abundant blessings.

At the Good Friday service this year, the offering was for Caritas and their program that feeds homeless high school students. I suggested this to the other pastors of our ecumenical service, and they liked the idea. I could only make this suggestion though, because this congregation had already made me aware of the need. Our faithfulness to feeding others was multiplied by other churches into a donation of over \$350! This is just how God works. Our desire to help was multiplied by God's grace.

We see this all the time in so many ministries. We want to help. We put in a little time and effort, and it gets multiplied to impact many people with things like full stomachs, smiles, and fellowship. And we will never know where it goes from there. Because of meals for veterans or chili suppers, lives are influenced in ways we cannot predict or measure. But we can trust that God's multiplication has worked through us to produce miracles of grace.

We grow in faith by our service, and as we grow, our growth produces growth in others. This is easy to see when we join together in Bible study. As one person shares their struggle to understand, others benefit and are challenged to grow as well. But I'm convinced it happens frequently, in all kinds of settings. The example of care and generosity I see all the time in this congregation inspire me to caring and generosity. Our giving to the food pantry inspires others to do the same, and inspires those who receive.



This is Henry. He's the student in Uganda whose school tuition I paid. I keep his picture on my refrigerator where I see it all the time and remember to pray for him. Many of you have similar pictures of other children who we sponsored. Henry's tuition was just a small amount, but it represents growth in my discipleship. And I often wonder what growth Henry is experiencing because of my growth. I pray he's having a good school year and learning lots that will help him grow into an intelligent, talented, generous adult. Maybe he's even growing in faith. No matter what, my growth promotes Henry's growth. And Henry's growth could be making many things possible. He may grow into a father, a teacher, a doctor, a police officer. I am humbled and grateful that I can send God's love and grace forward into the world through Henry--that Jesus' growth in me can become his growth and more.

Our scripture also tells us that God supplies the grace, the free, unearned, unmerited gift of his love, compassion and forgiveness. In our struggle to grow, we don't have to worry about our imperfections or mistakes. God's grace has us covered, and this frees us. We don't have to expend our energy working out our own salvation. We don't have to get distracted by trying to be perfect. We don't have to focus on ourselves all the time. Because we are generously given salvation, we are free to send that salvation on to others through acts of kindness and mercy. It doesn't have to be all about us; grace frees us to focus on others.

Grace also empowers us for this service. We don't have to care for others under our own power, but by the power of the Holy Spirit, who enables us to do so much more than we could on our own.

You may have never thought about this, but there's a lot of prayer that goes into my Sunday morning. Long before a worship service is ever planned or a sermon is ever written, I'm praying about the direction God wants me to take. I work on each Sunday's worship over the course of multiple days—each day beginning in prayer. And sometimes I get stuck and have to pray again! And every Sunday morning, at the beginning of the service when I come to the altar and pray, all I'm saying to God is, "Please help me!" I know there is no way I can perform this sacred task without the power of the Holy Spirit. That's why after the service, as some people thank me for it or compliment my sermon, I usually say, "Praise God!" It's really God who is behind it, not me. Without God's grace, I would still be a psychologist, and probably not a very good one if I tried to do it without Him.

Whatever we do in life, whatever our calling, we can rely on God for help, support, encouragement and power. I keep this scripture from Isaiah 41: 13 above my desk and refer to it often:

I am the LORD your God
 who takes hold of your right hand
 and says to you, Do not fear;
 I will help you. *New International Version*

And so I say yet again: "Praise God!"

We are called to respond to God's offer of growth and grace. Here is Matthew 13: 3-9:

(Jesus) said many things to them in parables: "A farmer went out to scatter seed. As he was scattering seed, some fell on the path, and birds came and ate it. Other seed fell on rocky ground where the soil was shallow. They sprouted immediately because the soil wasn't deep. But when the sun came up, it scorched the plants, and they dried up because they had no roots. Other seed fell among thorny plants. The thorny plants grew and choked them. Other seed fell on good soil and bore fruit, in one case a yield of one hundred to one, in another case a yield of sixty to one, and in another case a yield of thirty to one. Everyone who has ears should pay attention."

In our garden of discipleship, we need to have good soil. We have to be ones who are willing to be planted in Christ, nurtured by his light and living water, and grow into images of him.

How do we do that? We can start with the spiritual disciplines—with scripture, prayer, fasting, Christian fellowship, stewardship, study. It's so easy to skip these things. The dirty dishes are waiting in the sink, the television is beaoning, our phone is buzzing, we have emails to read.

Life seems like it would be so much easier if we just immerse ourselves in the things of this world...except that it's not easier in the long run. As it says in Psalm 121:

I raise my eyes toward the mountains.
 Where will my help come from?
 My help comes from the LORD,
 the maker of heaven and earth.
 God won't let your foot slip.
 Your protector won't fall asleep on the job.
 No! Israel's protector
 never sleeps or rests!
 The LORD is your protector;
 the LORD is your shade right beside you.
 The sun won't strike you during the day;
 neither will the moon at night.
 The LORD will protect you from all evil;
 God will protect your very life.
 The LORD will protect you on your journeys—
 whether going or coming—
 from now until forever from now.

What a beautiful promise from God! But we can't claim it unless we cultivate our relationship with him. The closer we are to God, the more our hearts and minds are open to all he is doing in, through and around us. That's good soil for a garden's worth of abundant life!

According to the parable, we not only need to be planted, but we must grow and produce fruit. God calls us to these things every day. Whether we are helping our family or serving a neighbor, sharing food or giving a listening ear, our willingness to be used for God's purposes leads to the fruit of his Kingdom.

In a way, our whole congregation is a garden. Like different varieties of plants, growing together for different purposes, we are individuals with different callings, growing in this place together. As flowers display the glory of God, we also proclaim God's glory when together we grow faith, share love and give service.

So here's the question I leave you with: what kind of seed are you? What's the quality of the soil you're planted in? How will you grow? And what kind of fruit will you produce?