

Over the years people told me they do not like the image of all avenging judgmental God in Old Testament. I would like to gently challenge that notion. One of the first images of God is a gentle one- in Genesis chapter 2, v. 8 the account of creation that Christians and Jews hold as sacred text, says that God *planted a garden* in Eden to the east. God, the gardener. Yet here is one of the first passages in the Bible where we are introduced to who God *is*—and God is not a warrior or a judge or even a sovereign, but first, a gardener, *a nurturer of all life, protector and planter, a designer, keeper, and pruner concerned with life's flourishing.* My own experiences with gardening bring to mind an entirely different set of emotions and dispositions than I typically consider God as having: delight in dirty hands, my own investment into the life I've planted, the thrill of fruit, the gentle attention to life, the compilation and cooperation with so many different factors—wind and rain, sun and predators—and the pleasure of simply being near it all. I find that when I am most weary of the despair and injustice of the world, my garden gives me an inexplicable hope.

Magnificent and intimate, powerful and gentle, God as gardener, whose deepest concern is life's flourishing, makes no clearer a case than in Easter's undoing of death and the vicarious humanity of the resurrected Son. *How unmistakably fitting that the place of the tomb and resurrection is also described as a garden, and Jesus himself is mistaken as the gardener on that creative morning.* This Maker of all creation, the Gardener who carefully tends to the world and the signs of its groaning, is *surely at work even now* making all things new.

What does this have to do with our text today- our text today is about healing, driving demons out. Every human being needs healing. Healing is much needed in our divided nation right now. So many people struggle with their own demons and are in need of internal healing. We are a broken people. We are a complicated messy group of people. Even though messy, we can learn from the mess. I like to indulge you with this text to the metaphor of a garden. In our scripture are the words ‘amazed’ by Jesus teaching and observance of ‘authority of Jesus’ are powerful concepts.

## Concepts that confuse people.

These concepts are symbols that hold a place of great significance in theology. A symbol is a representation that helps us to understand the depth of a spiritual reality. As an embodied spirit, the human intellect needs visible, physical symbols to better understand the invisible, spiritual realm.

At its core, the symbol of the garden represents creation and humanity's right-relationship with God. Key attributes of a garden are order, harmony between creatures, stability, beauty, provision, purpose, and nearness to God.

Contrasted with the garden symbol is the symbol of the **wilderness**. The wilderness symbol represents a place of testing, trial, temptation, competition, and purification. It strips a person down to the heart of who they are and reveals weakness and strength with particular clarity. Spending time in the wilderness is often a place to relearn how to encounter God and to once again attune our minds and hearts to hear God's voice. In this text, we are at the edge of a wilderness.

- Gardening teaches you that while planting correctly is important, the really successful gardens are the ones you tend to. The ones you walk around every day, looking at plants, poking your finger in the soil to check the moisture level, looking at the underside of leaves for insects, and pulling weeds.

***What a perfect metaphor for your spiritual life and your ministry. It takes tending to daily.***

- Gardeners know they must be sensitive to seasons. There is one season to plant, one to fertilize, one to prune, one to protect the plant, one to watch out for infestations of pests. And of course, there's a season when you just sit down on the ground and enjoy the beauty of your garden.

***In ministry, you know it has seasons too. There are times of great victory and joy, and there are times when it seems like God has removed his blessing from your work. There are times to sit back and watch the growth***

***you have encouraged in others, and times when you need to protect those to whom you minister .***

•Gardeners realize that they have a lot of responsibility to care for their plants, but ultimately, they cannot make anything grow. Their job is to plant, water, and protect, but they are always amazed by the growth and beauty that results. They didn't cause that, and they know it.

***The most effective minister never caused another person to become a Christian. The most dedicated disciple-maker never caused a young Christian to grow. In fact, we call the qualities we hope to see in those to whom we minister the “fruit” of their yield to the Holy Spirit. We have tended and watered and weeded, but it is the Spirit who produces the fruit.***

•Gardeners do more than help things grow – they also stop some things from growing: weeds. **Weeds are deceptive.** We never plant them, but they always show up – and sometimes they grow so quickly that they are as large as our plants almost overnight. And before you know it they are choking out your veggies, herbs, and flowers, stealing water and nutrients, and reproducing. Gardeners realize that part of tending the garden daily is looking for and uprooting weeds – and when we don't go into our garden for several days the weeds can almost take over.

***Spiritually, weeds can represent anything that chokes out and robs the plant – sin certainly, but also the cares of the world and the pleasures of this life. If we are ministering in the name of Jesus, we have to be careful to get rid of the weeds in our own life and help the ones to whom we're ministering identify the weeds that are growing up next to them.***

•Gardeners know that they have to do more than plant, fertilize, and water. There are also times when you must **prune**. Master gardeners tell us that pruning is necessary for growth. We prune plants to remove crossed, damaged or diseased branches which will stress the plant. Pruning also improves air flow through the plant and encourages better branch distribution — resulting in a healthier, more vigorous and disease-tolerant plant.

***Digging and weeding and pruning are great times to pray, to think, and to listen to God. There is precious little time in our world where we're not plugged in to some kind of media. Gardening can be one of those times – and God will use your garden and teach you all kinds of lessons.***

So when Jesus commands the demon to leave- we in turn get our spiritual rejuvenation in tending to a garden and think of the ways to command injustice of our society , which I believe are the weeds of our society to name just a few- Greed, notion of scarcity, judgment, Racism, sexism, classism, and all the other isms **-to get out-** The Violence, pain, brokenness **Get out- the** Negative energies : **Get out! Get Out! We're putting you on notice. There is no room for anything that tries to rob us of our sacredness here in this church nor in our own hearts.**

Too often we look at demons or we know today mental illness as a stigma. Not a stigma! This is not a defeat and there is no shame in this.

Psalm 22 that Jesus understands our pain and our loss because He went through it on the Cross - and God is never far from us; but always there to love, heal and provide. My, how the world would change. Today will be different - Go with me, in your mind's eye, to a beautiful garden. Maybe one you saw on vacation, or will see later this summer. A garden at a metro park, a past president's mansion, a water garden, a conservatory. All of that was created by the Holy Spirit working through human minds and hands for your enjoyment. In the book called SHACK, , Sarayu, the Holy Spirit, and Mack take a walk. As he rounded the trees, he saw for the first time a magnificent garden and somehow contained within a plot of land hardly larger than an acre. For whatever reason, Mack had expected a perfectly manicured and ordered English garden. But it wasn't! It was chaos in color. His eyes tried unsuccessfully to find some order in this blatant disregard for certainty. Dazzling sprays of flowers were blasted through patches of randomly planted vegetables and herbs, vegetation the likes of which Mack had never seen. It was confusing, stunning, and incredibly beautiful. He stood amazed.

Why does God's garden called Earth get ugly sometimes? Why do we make bad decisions, why does evil flourish? Because we have the power to make choices. God is not a dictator. Love is not forcing someone to love you. Love is giving someone the freedom to love and express love. Our choices determine the kind of soil we will be. The seed is perfect, it is God's. The planter is Jesus who comes and wishes to make a home in the soil of our hearts. This is what Jesus is doing in our text today, Our choices determine what happens to God's Word-seed. The less godly choice, the more weeds, the less fruit, the less harvest for God. And why doesn't God just root out all the evil? The disciples who were persecuted and saw loved ones die tragic deaths asked the same question.

IN the book the Shack, get more interesting-While they are in the garden Sarayu (representing the Holy Spirit) hands Mack a shovel, rake, scythe, and pair of gloves and floated out and down a particularly overgrown path that seemed to go in the general direction of the far end of the garden. "Mackenzie." She pointed directly at the incredible purple and yellow patch. "I would like your help clearing this entire plot of ground. There is something very special that I want to plant here tomorrow, and we need to get it ready." She looked at Mack and reached for the scythe. As they work, Sarayu and Mack have a discussion about why good and evil exist together. She says, "We created everything that actually exists, including what you consider the bad stuff. But when I created it, it was only good, because that is just the way I am- "But," Mack continued, not satisfied, "then why has so much of the 'good' gone 'bad'?" Now Sarayu paused before answering. "You humans, see so little in your own eyes. You are truly blind to your own place in the creation. Having chosen the ravaged path of independence, you don't even comprehend that you are dragging the entire creation along with you." She shook her head and the wind sighed through the trees nearby. "So very sad, but it won't be this way forever." They then shook the dirt from the roots and threw them onto one of the piles that Mack had earlier raked together. "I'll burn those later." "Indeed!" The choice to eat of that tree tore the universe apart, divorcing the spiritual from the physical. They died, expelling in the breath of their choice the very breath of God. I would say that is a problem!" Hmmm – so God doesn't root out the weeds; doesn't get rid of evil people? No, God waits until the end of the world and then judgment. But in

the mean time, the Holy Spirit does come to convict us, challenge us, encourage us, help us make the best decisions so we can move away from evil and grow and produce an abundant harvest for God. So, we have choices to make. 2 trees in the garden, remember? The Tree of Life and the tree of good and evil. Who do we follow; what do we decide? The outcome of our choices is the fruit of our lives and the harvest God brings. The choices we make show who we are by the fruit we produce. So, we choose – life or death, blessing or evil. But we also choose if we will allow the Holy Spirit to come and help us, to root out the evil and bad, and replant the good, the wholesome, the love and grace which produces good fruit for the Kingdom. Some seed fell in fertile soil and returned a harvest of 30, 60, 100 fold. At the end, Mack looks at the pile of weeds and brush that had disfigured the garden. He says, ‘What a mess this is. Even though it seems like lots of work still needs to be done, I feel strangely at home and comfortable here.’ It is here, Sarayu, the Holy Spirit, stepped toward him until she had invaded his personal space and said, **“And well you should, Mackenzie, because this garden is your soul. This mess is you! Together, you and I, we have been working with a purpose in your heart. And it is wild and beautiful and perfectly in process. To you it seems like a mess, but I see a perfect pattern emerging and growing and alive.”** What does this mean? When you allow Him, the Holy Spirit comes to work in us, to root out evil, to plant good seeds, to furrow the ground of our heart so we can produce spiritual fruit, an abundant harvest for God.

What do you do when you know your garden, your soul is a mess? Need some demons to cast out? When the weeds have taken over, the decisions you make breed worse decisions? You must make a choice to **let God be God**. To let the Master Gardener take over. To root out the evil that needs to go and ask God to plant the seeds you so desperately need to live the life God created you to live. Then you and I have to nurture that – this is what worship and small group meetings do. We are nurtured by other souls, fed the Word of God, and are rained on by the beautiful Spirit of God. And where we need pruned and prepared – then we can produce beautiful, spiritual fruit. Today you have a choice. The time of choice has ended. In the final garden called the Kingdom of God, there is no evil and no more of what we would call good. And we have no more choices, for there is only God and Jesus and those who have already made a choice to

follow Christ and who allow the Holy Spirit to produce spiritual fruit through them. The Message? Choose now. Choose Jesus. That is the authority. Choose to live in His garden and let Him, the Master gardener do His best planting, pruning, and fertilizing on your soul. Put yourself in the position to allow the Holy Spirit to begin to produce fruit in your life today. Tomorrow may be too late but today you can begin a journey of the beauty of producing a great harvest with God. God bless you as you do.

The garden that rests beside the shack in Mack's vision represents Mack's own heart, his soul. It is a chaotic mess but beautiful, and, more importantly, tended by the Holy Spirit. Indeed, speaking for the Triune community, the Spirit assures Mack that it is also ,our garden' . There is hope for the mess because God works in this garden; it is his garden too! To God it is not a mess but a ,living fractal' (p. 138—view some images of fractals on the internet to grasp their chaotic but inspiring beauty). It has meaning, significance, beauty, and purpose. Young paints a picture of Sarayu and Mack gardening together. They are pulling up weeds and tending the garden. The Spirit, doing the lion's share of the work, cooperates with Mack in beautifying the garden. Together they prepare ground for a new planting. They dig up the roots that will ,harm the seed \*they+ will plant' (p. 133). It is a seedling that Mack will soon lay into the ground himself with the help of the Triune God. Amidst the 'chaos in color' (p. 128), however, there is a ,wound in the garden' (131). **It is Mack's pain, his Great Sadness. This is the area that the Spirit and Mack worked to prepare for fresh plantings**

Why the shack—the icon of his deepest pain?' Mack rages in his inner thoughts. ,Certainly God would have better places to meet him?' . The shack, metaphorically, is Mack's own woundedness, his hurt. It is where Mack keeps his secrets, his hidden thoughts and he does not let anyone—even his wife Nan—into his shack. We each have our own shack. The shack is Young's metaphor for his hidden, wounded self. It is his real self; the self that hides behind the façade which projects his life as if it were a beautiful, well-kept house. The shack is Young's soul. It is something which he and others built, just as our own shacks are built through our own experiences and choices, joys and tragedies. William P. Young, the author, is Mackenzie Allen Phillips, the main

character in the story. Young's soul is pictured in *The Shack* as a shack. The story is fictional but true. It is the story of a wounded soul filled with hidden secrets, addictions, and lies. In this story Young's true self meets God.

The Shack is Young's parable about how God met him at his shack and changed his life. God invited him to the shack. **God met him in his pain and shame—not to judge it but to heal it; not to shame him but to love him. God does not invite us to the shack to shame us or express his disappointment. He invites us to experience his mercy and love. He welcomes us in our own shacks in order to let us know that he is ,especially fond' of us.**

I have a suggestion: Plant a garden but planting a garden will teach you lessons about spiritual growth that you don't learn out of a book. I believe every American should have a plot of ground with tax credit from Government and plant something. They would need to plant, water, weed, fertilize ... and get their hands dirty. Then, take care of their garden. And watch. Then respond to what they see, from weeds to aphids to grasshoppers to animals that like to munch on growing things. They wouldn't need a curriculum – God will provide that as they work their garden.

The truth of the mystery of the garden and wilderness is that God provides and tends for both landscapes. The natural and unbridled majesty of the wilderness and the cultivated beauty of the garden both have as their purpose drawing us nearer to God. The difference between the two is what our needs are at a given time. Let us each invite the Holy Spirit into our hearts and our grief to allow God to lead us into the wilderness and tend the gardens of our soul to produce God's fruit in our lives.