

Come to the Garden: 4. The Kingdom of God
John 15:1-2, 4-5; John 18:1, Matthew 26:36, 39
March 18, 2018
Pastor Steve Richards

How many of you have dogs? Our ten year old dog, Daisy, died last July and by the end of August we adopted a puppy to fill the hole in our hearts when Daisy died. Some of you share photos of your children or grandchildren. We share puppy photos. Winston Churchill is now 9 months old, and he's a still a challenge. I've noticed a few things about both dogs. We buy the high end dog food from the pet store, and I know he's well-fed. But we can be out walking and if I'm not watching he is drawn to all sorts of nasty stuff along the path – and he'll eat it! "Don't eat that, Winston." But he'll eat it before I can get it away from him. He's not had a chance to discover our backyard yet without the snow, but our backyard slopes down to a wooded and swampy area and sometimes when we let Daisy into the backyard she would sniff around and find that another animal had been there and then she would roll around in whatever it was. Any of you have a dog that does that? I was always, "Daisy, don't do that! That's disgusting!" And what she liked more than anything was to run out the backdoor and head into the swamp. She'd be out the door, running down the hill, and we would grab a bag of cubed chicken from the refrigerator and call out to her, "Daisy, chicken!" and we'd throw chicken in her direction. She loved chicken. And sometimes she would stop and come back for chicken. Other times, she would look back at us, look toward the swamp – and she'd choose the swamp. And we'd call Petco and make an appointment for a bath in about an hour, because about an hour later, she would be at the back door barking to come inside. Muddy, happy, smelling so bad we wouldn't let her inside. Instead, we put her in the car and took her to Petco.

And last week as I thought about that, I realized she was not so different from all of us. Our master tells us not to do something and we find the thing we are not supposed to do, the very thing we want to do. Sometimes our master asks us to do something we don't want to do, and we hear the call of the swamp – something far more interesting that ends up getting us into a lot of "stink." And what we need is to be washed clean. And that's the biblical story.

In this Lenten season, we are looking at the garden stories from the Bible. The Bible begins in a garden, ends in a garden, Jesus prays in a garden, is arrested, buried, and raised in a garden. Three weeks ago, we looked at Genesis 1 that provides a poetic, worshipful story of creation. We are told that God made everything, and when God looked at everything God had made, God saw that it was very good. Genesis 2-3 provides a second garden story that explains why this world that God created very good is so messed up and broken. Adam and Eve are told that can have everything in the garden but one thing – and that becomes the one thing they want. Their story is really our story. We hear the serpent whisper, "try it, God wouldn't create it if you weren't supposed to have it." By their actions, it seems that they are saying, "Not Thy will, but MY will be done." Haven't we all prayed that prayer? We know what we want, and we want God to agree with us. Or, we know what God wants, but that's not what we want. And what happens? The Bible tells us we end up with pain and brokenness – it sticks! We hurt others and hurt ourselves.

The word for this is sin, but it's helpful to remember the Greek word for this – Hamartia. It was an archery term that meant "to miss the mark" – the arrow misses the target. What's wrong with this world? Harmartia – we've missed the mark. Pain, violence, greed, relationships torn apart, we miss the mark over and over again. But in our hearts, we still long for Eden. God has planted this seed deep in our souls which is there even if you don't believe in God. This longing for Eden, a place we've never been but long to return to. We wish there weren't terrorists acts. We wish people didn't text while driving and cross the center line and crash into another car. We

wish we didn't have shootings that killed children. This is not the world as it should be. And if we are honest, we all have moments when we wish we were not the people we are. We long for a better world and a better me. Maybe some of you remember this commercial that was popular in the 1970s. [video] Is that even possible, a world of love, where people treat each other with kindness, and sing together in harmony. We long for that. If only it was as easy as giving someone a Coke.

Last week, we looked at the Promised Land – not as a place, but an ideal, a way of living where people actually love God with all their heart, mind, soul, and strength – and love their neighbor as themselves – where everyone does justice, loves kindness, and walks humbly with God. But then Jesus comes on the scene, living in this place some called the Promised Land, only it was not really the Promised Land. It was the right address but the wrong place. Jesus was talking about the kingdom of God. It's what the world looks like when God is in charge and people are living as God wants. In the four gospels, Jesus mentions the kingdom of God 118 times and describes it hundreds of times. The kingdom of God is what we are longing for. Last week, I mentioned Ron Heifetz book, where he talks about the world as it is. It's what we see on the news and how we live each day. And the role of the leader is to show what should be. Jesus called this the Kingdom of God. And the job of the Christian is to close the gap – to move this world to what God intends. So that, in our hearts, we long for it. In our minds, we envision it, and with our hands, we start working for it.

Both Matthew and Mark's gospels tell us that Jesus appeared on the scene with this stark declaration: **The time has come. The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!** What does it mean to repent? The Greek word is metanoia, literally "change your mind." I like the way Eugene Peterson puts this in The Message: "**Times up! God's kingdom is here. Change your life and believe the message.**" There was the time the disciples asked Jesus, "Teach us how to pray." And every Sunday, we pray the prayer that Jesus taught. "Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed by thy name. Thy kingdom come, they will be done on earth as it is in heaven." What are we praying? Not to get to heaven, but to get heaven into us – not my will but thy will. First you need a vision of what God intends. It's like the flash of lightning on an unknown highway. In an instant, the countryside is suddenly splashed with light, everything comes into view and because of that glimpse we know where we are and where we are going. The reality is not the darkness but the light. Once you have the vision, then you work for it, inviting God to work through you. And how we do this is what Jesus was teaching in John 15. He used a garden metaphor, a vineyard. **I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.** Without the vine, there are no branches. Without branches, there is no fruit. The vine and branches are connected. It's a relationship. If you are attaching to Jesus, he will feed you with what you need to be empowered to bear good fruit, because on our own it will not happen. Thy kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven.

On the final evening of Jesus' earthly life, he went into a garden, the Garden of Gethsemane, to pray. He knew what lay ahead would be agony and death, and he prayed, I don't want this. I don't want to go through with this. Please take this "cup" from me. He meant the cup of suffering and death. God, please take it from me, yet **not my will, but THY will be done.** What were Adam and Eve saying in the garden? Not thy will but MY will be done. But in the garden of Gethsemane, Jesus says, not my will but THY will be done. Our lives hinge on this distinction. You decide everyday which prayer you will pray. If God's kingdom is to come on earth as in heaven, it hinges on the prayer we pray. In every relationship, what a difference if we pray – not my will but thy will. In every business transaction, not my will but they will. In whatever area of life is it, my will or thy will? One puts me at the center and the other puts God at the center.

How do I know God's will? It's what will fulfill God's vision. For me, it is paying attention to what is happening around me and stopping to consider what is the most loving thing I can do. It's the story a Dad who was traveling with his daughter. They were staying at one of the budget hotels near the airport. After checking into their room, they went down to the hotel lobby and started playing cards. As they were playing, a woman arrived to check into her room. She looked like she was in her late 50s, and she presented her credit card and the clerk ran it through the machine. She did this a couple of times and then said, "I'm sorry, but there is a problem with your credit card. It has been denied." And the woman said, "What will I do? I don't have any cash. I was planning on using my credit card. I don't know anyone that I can stay with." And the clerk suggested she call her credit card company – that sometimes when you travel and try to use the card, the bank puts a hold on the credit card and if you call, it can be straightened out. So the woman stepped around the corner to make the call. And while she was on the phone, the man felt like he should do something.

Haven't we all been somewhere and heard something and wondered whether we should do something – and often we wait until that feeling goes away figuring someone else will do something. But what if that nudge, that feeling is really God directing us to do something? So the man took a piece of paper and wrote a short message on it, and he walked to the front desk and said to the clerk, "I want to pay for her room. I'm a Christian, and I feel that's what God wants me to do. Please don't tell her I'm paying. Just say that someone walked through the lobby and overheard what happened and anonymously took care of it. And would you give her this note." And on the note it said: I'm sorry that you are having this problem. I want to bless you. I'm a Christian, and I feel God laid it on my heart to bless you. I want you to know that God loves you.

The man went back to playing cards with his daughter, and the woman returned to the front desk. She said that the problem with her credit card could not be fixed and did not know what to do. And the clerk replied, "Someone was passing through the lobby and overheard what happened and paid for your room." "Why would someone do that?" she asked. And clerk gave her the note. The woman left the lobby and headed toward her room. A few minutes later, the clerk approached the man and said, "I've never seen anything like that. In all my time working here, no one has ever done that. I can't wait to go home and tell my boyfriend what you did, and tomorrow I'm going to tell my manager about this. I can't believe you would do this!"

Do you see all the ways God was working? First of all, the man's daughter saw something. She saw what the gospel looks like in action. The woman who received the hotel room saw what Christians look like. In a time of need, she experienced the love of Christ. Then there was the clerk who saw the love of Christ in action and her boyfriend who heard about it and her manager who heard about it the next day. Do you see what happens when we do what God is calling us to do? And the person who felt the best, who received the greatest blessing was the man who spent \$120. It was the best \$120 he felt he had ever spent. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

There are about 500 people who will worship here or online this morning. What would happen if this week, each one looked for a way to bless someone? I believe God will send someone into your path, if you are paying attention. Which prayer will we pray – my will or thy will? Our lives hinge on this distinction.

Grow, Pray, Study for Week of March 18, 2018

Weekly Prayer: Gracious God, I awaken to a new day, knowing that this day and life itself is an amazing gift from you. There are many different directions that I could take and decisions that I could make, but help me to sense your call to follow you. Help this to be a day when I can say, "thy will be done." Amen.

Monday, March 19

Scripture: John 3:1-8; 2 Corinthians 5:16-17

There was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a Jewish leader. He came to Jesus at night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God, for no one could do these miraculous signs that you do unless God is with him." Jesus answered, "I assure you, unless someone is born anew, it's not possible to see God's kingdom." Nicodemus asked, "How is it possible for an adult to be born? It's impossible to enter the mother's womb for a second time and be born, isn't it?" Jesus answered, "I assure you, unless someone is born of water and the Spirit, it's not possible to enter God's kingdom. Whatever is born of the flesh is flesh, and whatever is born of the Spirit is spirit. Don't be surprised that I said to you, 'You must be born anew.' God's Spirit blows wherever it wishes. You hear its sound, but you don't know where it comes from or where it is going. It's the same with everyone who is born of the Spirit."

So then, from this point on we won't recognize people by human standards. Even though we used to know Christ by human standards, that isn't how we know him now. So then, if anyone is in Christ, that person is part of the new creation. The old things have gone away, and look, new things have arrived!

Observation: Jesus told his nighttime visitor Nicodemus that entering his Kingdom was like being born for a second time, like an act of creating new life. The apostle Paul echoed that, writing to the early Christians in the city of Corinth that God called them to live as a "new creation." Those links to the creation story evoked a connection between God's power as Creator of all that is and God's grace recreating our inner identities, and the attitudes out of which we live.

Application: The "new creation" refers both to the persons concerned and to the world which they enter, the world which has now been reconciled to the creator. In what ways do you see God's creative power at work in your life, and that of other Christians you know?

Prayer: Dear God, you've made me a new creation. Help me to remember that, to submit myself to you today so that as I live among others, they too will be able to see you at work in me. Amen.

Tuesday, March 20

Scripture: John 15:1-8

"I am the true vine, and my Father is the vineyard keeper. He removes any of my branches that don't produce fruit, and he trims any branch that produces fruit so that it will produce even more fruit. You are already trimmed because of the word I have spoken to you. Remain in me, and I will remain in you. A branch can't produce fruit by itself, but must remain in the vine. Likewise, you can't produce fruit unless you remain in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, then you will produce much fruit. Without me, you can't do anything. If you don't remain in me, you will be like a branch that is thrown out and dries up. Those

branches are gathered up, thrown into a fire, and burned. If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask for whatever you want and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified when you produce much fruit and in this way prove that you are my disciples.

Observation: Israelites often saw themselves as part of a vineyard God tended (Psalm 80:8-18; Isaiah 5:1-7). A golden sculpture of a vine over the porch of the Jerusalem Temple reinforced the image. Jesus used that image, but applied it differently. When his followers stayed united to him like branches to a vine, Jesus said their lives would bear the kind of fruit God sought. As followers of Christ, we do not commit to an impersonal set of ideas, but to the person of Jesus.

Application: “Producing fruit” was, of course, an image of what a vineyard-keeper expects the carefully tended vines to do. What kinds of “fruit” does God want your life to bear? How can you go about your daily business seeking to bear fruit for God, without becoming obsessed with externals or turning your spiritual commitment into a dry, detailed set of rules you must follow to earn salvation?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, keep me connected to you today. Let me be a branch through which your divine love can flow freely to bless the lives of other people around me. Amen.

Wednesday, March 21

Scripture: Mark 10:13-16; Matthew 21:12-16

People were bringing children to Jesus so that he would bless them. But the disciples scolded them. When Jesus saw this, he grew angry and said to them, "Allow the children to come to me. Don't forbid them, because God's kingdom belongs to people like these children. I assure you that whoever doesn't welcome God's kingdom like a child will never enter it." Then he hugged the children and blessed them.

Then Jesus went into the temple and threw out all those who were selling and buying there. He pushed over the tables used for currency exchange and the chairs of those who sold doves. He said to them, "It's written, My house will be called a house of prayer. But you've made it a hideout for crooks." People who were blind and lame came to Jesus in the temple, and he healed them. But when the chief priests and legal experts saw the amazing things he was doing and the children shouting in the temple, "Hosanna to the Son of David!" they were angry. They said to Jesus, "Do you hear what these children are saying?" "Yes," he answered. "Haven't you ever read, 'From the mouths of babies and infants you've arranged praise for yourself?'"

Observation: It is clear that Jesus loved children, and children loved him. Mark said Jesus was angry with his stern, overly “grown up” disciples. After he made it clear he welcomed the children, Mark added the lovely eyewitness detail that Jesus “hugged the children and blessed them.” Later, as children loudly sang his praise in ways that upset the Temple’s religious leaders, Jesus came down firmly on the children’s side. That’s God’s kingdom—like a garden it takes a child-like spirit to fully enjoy!

Application: Jesus’ words and actions said children were more likely to find favor with God than self-satisfied Pharisees or materialistic rulers. *The Message* paraphrases his forceful words in Mark 10:14-15 as: “Don’t push these children away. Don’t ever get between them and me. These children are at the very center of life in the kingdom. Mark this: Unless you accept God’s kingdom in the simplicity of a child, you’ll never get in.” What can you learn from the simplicity of children that will deepen and enrich your relationship with God?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, please keep me from ever growing too old inside to join the joyous, trusting circle of children you welcomed. Keep my heart fresh, flexible and smiling as I follow you. Amen.

Thursday, March 22

Scripture: Luke 17:20-21

Pharisees asked Jesus when God's kingdom was coming. He replied, "God's kingdom isn't coming with signs that are easily noticed. Nor will people say, 'Look, here it is!' or 'There it is!' Don't you see? God's kingdom is already among you."

Observation: Asked when (in the future) the Kingdom would come, Jesus told the Pharisees (powerful religious leaders in his day) that his Kingdom existed in a different dimension. They could experience it, but it was not subject to direct observation. He tried to move his hearers away from a focus on God's kingdom as a piece of land or a human organization. Instead he called them to join a kingdom defined by its citizens' worship of, and trust in, God every day.

Application: In verse 21, Luke used the Greek words *entos humon*, which could mean that God's Kingdom is "among you" or "within you." The question Jesus was answering made it clear (as the *Common English Bible* translators recognized) that "among you" was his primary meaning in this text. What are some ways in which you see God's Kingdom "among us" today? To what extent do both possible meanings ring true to your experience of the Kingdom of God?

Prayer: A great hymn says, "Immortal, invisible, God only wise, in light inaccessible hid from our eyes... thy great name we praise." Lord, surround me with your love and light as I sing you my praises and ask my questions. Amen.

Friday, March 23

Scripture: Luke 14:15-24

When one of the dinner guests heard Jesus' remarks, he said to Jesus, "Happy are those who will feast in God's kingdom." Jesus replied, "A certain man hosted a large dinner and invited many people. When it was time for the dinner to begin, he sent his servant to tell the invited guests, 'Come! The dinner is now ready.' One by one, they all began to make excuses. The first one told him, 'I bought a farm and must go and see it. Please excuse me.' Another said, 'I bought five teams of oxen, and I'm going to check on them. Please excuse me.' Another said, 'I just got married, so I can't come.' When he returned, the servant reported these excuses to his master. The master of the house became angry and said to his servant, 'Go quickly to the city's streets, the busy ones and the side streets, and bring the poor, crippled, blind, and lame.' The servant said, 'Master, your instructions have been followed and there is still room.' The master said to the servant, 'Go to the highways and back alleys and urge people to come in so that my house will be filled. I tell you, not one of those who were invited will taste my dinner.'"

Observation: The idea of the "Great Banquet" the Messiah would host for God's people at the end of the age went back 700 years before Jesus (Isaiah 25:6-9). Most rabbis thought the Banquet would be for them, and people a lot like them. Yet this parable, comparing God's Kingdom to a wonderful wedding feast, said there were poor, blind and lame guests at the table. Jesus knew many of the "invited" guests were refusing to attend his Kingdom feast. His picture of the final guest list at the feast would have shocked many of his hearers.

Application: Wedding banquets in Jesus' time often lasted for days, and were the greatest highlight of most people's lives. Yet in the parable, some found excuses (and pretty flimsy ones)

not to attend the banquet. What are some excuses we use in our own lives to not attend God's feast? How easy or hard do you find it to believe that God's Kingdom will in fact be like the most wonderful experience you can imagine?

Prayer: Dear God, I want to find a seat at your table, to take part in your great Banquet. Help me not to hoard your invitation just for myself, but to have a heart that wants to see everyone there. Amen.

Saturday, March 24

Scripture: Matthew 6:9-10; 26:36-46; John 18:1-6

Pray like this: Our Father who is in heaven, uphold the holiness of your name. Bring in your kingdom so that your will is done on earth as it's done in heaven.

Then Jesus went with his disciples to a place called Gethsemane. He said to the disciples, "Stay here while I go and pray over there." When he took Peter and Zebedee's two sons, he began to feel sad and anxious. Then he said to them, "I'm very sad. It's as if I'm dying. Stay here and keep alert with me." Then he went a short distance farther and fell on his face and prayed, "My Father, if it's possible, take this cup of suffering away from me. However—not what I want but what you want." He came back to the disciples and found them sleeping. He said to Peter, "Couldn't you stay alert one hour with me? Stay alert and pray so that you won't give in to temptation. The spirit is eager, but the flesh is weak." A second time he went away and prayed, "My Father, if it's not possible that this cup be taken away unless I drink it, then let it be what you want." Again he came and found them sleeping. Their eyes were heavy with sleep. But he left them and again went and prayed the same words for the third time. Then he came to his disciples and said to them, "Will you sleep and rest all night? Look, the time has come for the Human One to be betrayed into the hands of sinners. Get up. Let's go. Look, here comes my betrayer."

After he said these things, Jesus went out with his disciples and crossed over to the other side of the Kidron Valley. He and his disciples entered a garden there. Judas, his betrayer, also knew the place because Jesus often gathered there with his disciples. Judas brought a company of soldiers and some guards from the chief priests and Pharisees. They came there carrying lanterns, torches, and weapons. Jesus knew everything that was to happen to him, so he went out and asked, "Who are you looking for?" They answered, "Jesus the Nazarene." He said to them, "I Am." (Judas, his betrayer, was standing with them.) When he said, "I Am," they shrank back and fell to the ground.

Observation: Of all the gospel writers, only John used the word "garden" to identify the place where Jesus went to pray after the Last Supper, his last night before he went to the cross. The first words of his gospel ("In the beginning") had already linked the story of Jesus to Genesis' creation story. His garden language signaled that Jesus' story was the story of a new creation, of a fresh start for humanity. In this second garden, Jesus reversed the fateful choice Adam and Eve made in Eden, the choice all humans are tempted to make: the choice to say "MY will, not yours, God, be done." Jesus prayed, "Not what I want but what you want."

Application: Jesus' presence in the garden was no accident. He had chosen to come to this moment (Luke 9:51). Still, he recoiled from the awful suffering he knew lay ahead. But, he told God, "Not what I want but what you want." Sooner or later, we all face one or more life situations that seem unbearable. Jesus honestly told God, in the Garden, what he wished could happen. What does that teach you about the value of honestly facing and expressing your feelings at

times of anguish? But also, to what extent have you learned, like Jesus, to trust God enough to say, “Not what I want but what you want”?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, in that second garden, you reversed the curse of humans trying to be wiser than God, to pursue our own will. Thank you for opening the gates of eternity that night, and giving me a model of trust toward which I keep growing. Amen.