

Public Garden

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Deuteronomy 5:1-21; Matthew 19:16-22

This morning the first of our lessons from Deuteronomy is the second of two records in the Bible of what you and I have come to know as the Ten Commandments. The Decalogue, as Biblical scholars would put it. The ten basic laws given to the people of Israel in their trek across the Sinai wilderness on their way to the land they believed was promised them. They are not the only laws that Moses and the people received in the wilderness, but it is safe to say that they are the foundational laws of the Old Testament from which all the other laws – hundreds of other laws --are an extension. For the most part the people of God have seen the Ten Commandments as the foundation upon which to build a righteous and holy life. So let's listen to this account of the Ten Commandments.

Deuteronomy 5: 1-20, Matthew 19:16-22

One of my sabbatical excursions this summer took me to the city of Boston to perform a wedding. On one of my morning walks while there I happened onto to a place I had heard about, but had never visited. It was the Boston Public Garden. The Boston Public Garden is the first Public Garden in the United States. The dream of it began back in 1837 – when the philanthropist Horace Gray had this idea to take very valuable land in the middle of the city upon which high rises could be built, corporate centers could be built, transportation hubs could be built – functional facilities to serve the city and expand the tax base – to take this land and instead of using it for such practical and functional purposes - dedicate it to the purposes of maintaining a botanical oasis in the midst of the bustling city. 24 acres of prime real estate! That's a lot of land to give over to a garden in the middle of a city. But they did it and what you find today is a lovely rectangle of land, 15 to 20 square city blocks worth, filled with the most spectacular gardens. This serene place to which to retreat from the crazy world and take in the beautiful flowers and monuments and stroll down the quiet lanes so as to rediscover all that is beautiful.

And the most beautiful part of the Public Garden is that it is public! It is not only open to the public, it is available to the public morning, noon and night. Morning, noon and night anyone can walk in and enjoy these beautiful grounds. No admission fee. No security check. It is simply there for you to enjoy anytime you want. And what is perhaps most amazing about the place is that while people are free to come and go – and thousands of course do everyday – the garden is kept in the most pristine of conditions. When you walk in you feel like you should have paid admission. But you haven't. Instead the gates welcome all to this sanctuary of beauty and goodness.

Is there anything more lovely than a lush and beautiful garden?

No surprise then that the Bible begins with a garden and it ends with a garden. We all know about the Garden of Eden – the first Public Garden where Adam and Eve are given charge to take care of the garden for all of creation to enjoy. Virtually a heaven on earth. Life begins in this beautiful Garden of Eden. And then there is the garden at the end of the Bible that Revelation talks about as being within the New Jerusalem, the heavenly city wherein is found the river of the water of life and the tree of life for the healing of the nations. No less beautiful than the Garden of Eden. Two gardens – Garden of Eden – the New Jerusalem. Now as most of us know the story goes that Adam and Eve prove themselves unworthy of taking care of the Garden – and they are expelled. Thrown out. Not only thrown out, but the gate to the Public Garden is closed. With an cherub security guard making sure no one gets back in. It's a way of explaining to the reader that you and I do not live any longer in a Shangri-La. We're not in Kansas anymore. The world is a messy place and there is no getting back and faith is about looking ahead to another world where the garden of the river and tree of life are found. And the point of the whole matter is that God is a gardner. A gardener from beginning to end with every hope that his children will come and enjoy what He has provided. And there is this yearning deep down inside to find our way to that beautiful garden of God.

Which might explain why Jesus on more than one occasion gets asked about inheriting eternal life. In our story this morning it happens to be a man with a little bit of money. He wants to know how to achieve eternal life. In other words he's asking how do I know I am on my way to the garden? This eternal garden? How do I find the

path to the garden of the river and tree of life? And it is interesting that when Jesus gets asked this question about getting to the garden he answers by pointing him to the Ten Commandments. What's in the law? Jesus asks. And the answer is the Ten Commandments. So, Jesus says, if you want to inherit eternal life? Follow the Ten Commandments.

Now it is really easy that when we hear Jesus say, Follow

“ [God] begins the story with a garden and he ends it with a garden – but the truth is he never stops gardening. God is trying to garden inside each of our lives.”

the Ten Commandments. Or we hear Moses say, Follow the Ten Commandments – it is really easy to hear what they are saying as God simply just trying to give us the answers to the test. Answers to the test which at some point we're going to have to take. And that religion is a matter of knowing the answers to the test which at some point you're going to have to take, but hopefully not for a long time.

Which might explain this strange relationship human beings generally have with the Ten Commandments. It's been my experience as a pastor that when it comes to the Ten Commandments we have sort of an approach/avoidance thing going on. We like the idea of the Ten Commandments. We are in favor of them. We think they are good to have around. We think everyone should follow them. Some of us even like the idea of them being on some monument in some public space in the middle of town. And we know they provide some sort of framework for good and righteous living. We like the idea of there being some set of guidelines for doing the right thing, and yet strangely we are a little fuzzy on the details. We may

even be at a loss to name them all. As important as Jesus thought them to be, it might be a little unnerving to think of him asking the same question he asks the rich guy – “What are the commandments?” And maybe the reason we would be flummoxed a bit is that there has been this huge disconnect for us – and the disconnect is that we keep forgetting that God is the perpetual gardener. He begins the story with a garden and he ends it with a

garden – but the truth is he never stops gardening. God is trying to garden inside each of our lives!

It doesn't take much to figure out when you spend time in Jesus' ministry, in Jesus' teaching, in Jesus' preaching, it doesn't take much to figure out that the pretty much the whole MO for Jesus – the whole modus operandi – is to challenge us to bear fruit. It is the theme he comes back to time and time again. Live the fruitful life. Every tree is known by its fruit. By your fruit you shall be known. I am the vine you are the branches. The one who hears the word and understands it yields fruit a hundred fold. Jesus, you see, is looking to put into us and get out of us a garden. And then you begin to realize that these Ten Commandments Jesus keeps pointing us to are his means to start a garden. This is Jesus' prescription for the eternal and beautiful life.

The psalmist says, those who meditate on the law, are like trees planted by streams of water which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither. In all that they do they prosper!

You see it's not just about us getting to the garden it's also about getting the garden into us!

Jesus says I come that you might have life and have it abundantly.

My dream for you is that your life might become this abundant garden. And if you're curious on how to grow a garden within the contours of your life – then try these things:

1. Stay focused on the only source of beauty – God alone and let him cast his seed.
2. Accept no cheap substitutes.
3. Never disparage the one who wants the best for you.
4. Rest yourself for a time each week and let the seeds grow.
5. Honor the people who had a hand in your creation.
6. Give life, don't take it.
7. Don't take what isn't yours.
8. Keep your promises.
9. Tell the truth.
10. And be content with what you have.

Sounds like the good life to me. And the thing is – it's not just a beautiful life, it's kind of the life we've always wanted. This life where the source of beauty is planting within us these seeds of beauty and from them we discover this life that begets life and keeps promises and remains content with whatever we've been given.

The apostle says it another way – he calls it the fruit of the spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. It's the beautifully gracious and peaceful life. This flowering garden in the midst of a world of trouble.

And then on top of it all – Jesus says not only do I want to plant this beautiful garden, this beautiful life inside you – but I want to invite people into it. He says to the rich young ruler – follow the commandments – and the ruler says well I've done that. And then Jesus says – OK now, invite someone into it. Sell everything you have and give the money to the poor. Make your garden a public garden and invite the neighbor, the stranger, the poor, the hungry, the dangerous to come inside your garden.

That was the big debate, right, with the Pharisees. The Pharisees kind of liked the idea that religion was about

doing all the right things so as to separate yourself from the other – the stranger, the poor, the hungry, the potentially dangerous. That's what they were called actually, the separate ones. Keep the commandments and then build this wall so as to keep everyone out. Our little private garden.

That's the great temptation of piety, right? Create this little spot of holiness and then make sure not to mix it up with those who might compromise my holiness. Put a wall around the garden. I think that's a struggle for a lot of us – trying to live this abundant life, this flowering life of obedience, trying to immerse ourselves in the beautiful soil and seed of the commandments and at the same time not walling ourselves from those around us. Because you know if there is anything folks say about us religious people – is that we've got these walls. We've got these barriers. These gates that get locked maybe to certain kinds of people. That our gardens aren't really public gardens. That we are a little too insecure about our own gardens to let any stranger in – especially ones that don't agree with us or act like us or look like us. Because if we let these folks into our lives, I mean into our lives, through our gates and into our flower beds – why there is no telling what they might do. Better to build a wall, put up a fence.

And of course that's what got Jesus in the most trouble – he wanted the walls down. He wanted a public garden. This botanical gathering called the church filled with the flowering of the law, the fruit of the spirit – and that door and that door and that door and that door, wide open for any who should come our way. And not just those doors with hinges and panic bars – but the doors into the interiors of our lives. Not as judgment, not as “here's what you have to do”, not with some sense of superiority, but as this invitation to experience the work of the gardener.

It makes sense that when they asked Jesus about what was the greatest of all the laws – Jesus said, Well, you should love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength – but there's one just as important – you shall love your neighbor as yourself. In other words, what's the point of having a garden if you're not going to welcome folks in? No more walls!

The elders and deacons and staff are reading right now a book called Tattoos on the Heart written by a Catholic priest, Father Gregory Boyle, whose mission it has been for the past 25 years to reside in one of the most dangerous neighborhoods in the country – Boyle Heights of Los

Angeles – a part of the world overrun by gangs and street violence. And the book is the story of what it looks like to be a garden in a hard, hard world. A public garden. A safe haven of grace. And what redemption can take place if we open our lives to the stranger, the poor, the dangerous. It's not all pretty. Some things work out well and some don't. And at one point Father Boyle writes this:

There is a longing in us all to be God-enthralled. So enthralled that to those hunkered down in their disgrace, in the shadow of death, we become transparent messengers of God's own tender mercy. We want to be seized by that same tenderness; we want to bear the largeness of God.

We follow the commandments to be enthralled by God and when we are enthralled by God we bear the largeness of God,

It's why not a sentence of this sermon was written without my thinking of a man I've known since I was 18 years old. He was a professor at my college. He taught religion. He knew his Old Testament. He knew his New Testament. He knew the Ten Commandments. I knew he knew these things not because of any class I took from him. I knew he knew these things because he and his wife opened their lives to me. Not just to me but to hundreds and hundreds of kids like me. College students. College students with a lot of baggage. A lot of crazy ideas. A lot of insecurities. A lot of opinions. A lot of brokenness. But they let us in. Some of us were smart, some were not so smart. Some were white, some were black. Some were conservative, some were liberal. Some believed, some didn't believe. Some were gay, some were straight. Some were addicted, some were clean. But we all found our way into this garden. This public garden. And we saw the fruit – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. And we thought, or at least I thought, boy – life can be good. Life can be pretty beautiful. There are gardens to be found in the midst of this messy world. And they're found inside people like this. They bore the largeness of God. And maybe, just maybe, I can be one of them.

And you? What about you? Have you wondered that about yourself? That at whatever place in this world you've got yourself – that maybe that's the very place for a garden to grow? A beautiful garden. A beautiful public garden.



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Church of the Palms

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