

# The Gardener and the Carpenter

The Fourth Sunday after Pentecost, June 17, 2018.

I Samuel 15:34-16:13; II Corinthians 5:6-10, 14-17; Mark 4:26-34.

*The Gardener and the Carpenter.*

This is the title of a book for parents by Alison Gopnik that came out a little over a year ago. Dr. Gopnik is a psychology and philosophy professor at the University of California.

Gopnik suggests parents today often approach the task of raising children like carpenters building a piece of furniture. We often treat children like material to be shaped into a final product. If you bring together particular components and mold them in particular ways you'll get a predictable result.

Gopnik says it makes sense that this approach emerged. Over the last hundred years or so, we became more mobile. We moved away from the tribe. We had children later. By the time we became parents, we had years of experience in school and on the job. So, we approached the task of raising children that way. This shift in thinking even changed our vocabulary, Gopnik says. Prior to the 1970's we spoke of *having* parents and *being* parents. A relationship. After the 1970's we spoke of *parenting*. A verb. A job.

Of course, carpenters are useful, and the carpenter approach to parenting has its strengths, but Gopnik believes children also need to be gardened, not built. Gardeners create an environment in which life can grow and adapt and change. Gardeners come alongside the plant to prune and train as circumstances change. Rather than try to predict exactly how many branches and buds will form on the vine, gardeners watch in wonder as the plant blossoms.

And in today's gospel lesson, Jesus the carpenter said God is like a gardener.

The kingdom of God is Jesus's shorthand for the world as God intends it to be. It is the dream of God for all creation, a world where people are cared for and the earth is fruitful and all have enough. It was God's intention in the garden of Eden and in setting the Hebrew children free and in the words of the prophets and in the person of Jesus. But according to Jesus it does not emerge according to a tightly controlled plan.

Instead, the kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he knows not how.

21<sup>st</sup> century farming is highly controlled. Farmers today plant in rows. They rotate crops. They add things to the soil to make it more productive. Scientists play around with the genes of the plant to produce new varieties. Today's farmers are more like carpenters in some ways. But that

wasn't possible in the first century. Then, farmers generally threw seeds on the ground wherever they could and hoped they would sprout. The process was not a complete mystery, of course. When Jesus said, "he knows not how," he was not implying that the farmer had no idea any of this would happen. What Jesus meant was that the farmer knew he was not dictating the outcome. The farmer knew he was not the source of the growth. The earth produces of itself.

Likewise, Jesus said, the ways of God unfold in the world in unpredictable but reliable ways. God has scattered the seeds of the kingdom and they will grow. They may grow in ways or places we do not expect, by they will grow.

In case that metaphor didn't make sense, Jesus said the same thing another way. The kingdom of God is like a mustard seed, the smallest of seeds which becomes the greatest of shrubs. Mustard was the kudzu of Palestine. Once it started growing, it took over and was hard to stop. Jesus said God's ways will grow and grow and grow and nothing will prevail against it. Keep in mind birds weren't exactly welcome in those days. They were seen as pests or as cheap food or offerings. But the ways of God will grow and provide support and shelter even for forgotten, annoying things like birds.

Now, of course, this world today does not look like God's garden. It's a wilderness, and we have to wander through it. Weeds get planted along with the wheat – Jesus told another parable about that. In a world where good can flourish, danger can flourish as well. It all grows up together.

And so it might be tempting to want a carpenter style God. It might be tempting to want God to create a more orderly kingdom, where evil is punished and good is rewarded and things unfold according to a precise, predictable plan. But according to Jesus, that's not what we have. God's goodness is not orderly. It is not confined by our expectations, thanks be to God. It grows wild. God scatters the seeds of the kingdom and marvels at how they grow and who they shelter. God is like a gardener.

And as people of God, we are invited to be gardeners as well, to work with God to create environments where all life can flourish. I want us to consider three ways.

First, we are invited to be gardeners as parents and grandparents.

David's father Jesse was having more of a carpenter moment. He had a plan for his sons and now the moment had arrived. One of his sons would be anointed king. Imagine his pride. He started with his oldest, the one he thought most prepared. When he wasn't the right one, Jesse brought out Abinadab, then Shammah, then four more, all the way down the line. None were right. Finally, the prophet forced Jesse to bring out the youngest, David, who was out keeping the sheep. Had Jesse just forgotten about him? Or was Jesse trying to hide him from the prophet because he was so young he might embarrass everyone? Either way, the son Jesse forgot to mention was the one chosen as king. In that moment, Jesse stopped trying to control the outcome. He watched in wonder as his son surprised him. That is often our job as parents, to watch in wonder as our children surprise us.

Second, even if we are not parents or grandparents, we are all invited to be gardeners for children in our church, to work with God to create an environment where children and young people flourish here. Just two Sundays ago, there were 29 in children's chapel, plus nine babies in the nursery, plus the youth group, plus more who weren't here that week. This is why youth and children's ministry are so important. All summer adults are meeting with children to share a skill or hobby. This is gardening. You are creating an environment that allows children and youth to grow.

But this church community is just practice for the larger task. Third, we are invited to be gardeners of all children, to create an environment where all children can thrive and grow. Children at the border. Children in failing schools. Children throughout our community. As God's gardeners the question we often need to ask is, "How does this decision or policy affect children? How will this action affect generations yet to come?"

And here's the thing about gardening. Variety helps gardens grow. Grouping different plants together can cut down on weeds and reduce bugs. Rotating crops replenishes the soil. When we allow for variety the whole garden becomes more fruitful. When we make room for one another creation thrives.

One final story about gardening. Ron Finley lives in South Los Angeles. He describes it as a place of liquor stores and fast food, drive thrus and drive bys, meaning drive by shootings. He noticed the drive thrus were killing more people than drive bys because the area where he lived was a food desert. There was no healthy food. So he became what some people call a guerilla gardener. These are people who plant seeds on land that does not belong to them. He tells his story in a TED talk. He started planting food in medians and vacant lots. He got some volunteers together to plant more and the movement spread. He tells people, "Growing your own food is like printing your own money." People ask if he is afraid someone will steal his food. His response is, "No. I want them to steal it. That's why it is on the street." His garden has become a tool of transformation for his neighborhood. He's gotten kids involved. He says, "With gardening I see an opportunity to train these kids to take control of their lives. I want us all to become gangster gardeners. Be a gangster with your shovel. Let that be your weapon of choice."

Sounds like the kingdom of God.

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Rev. Grace Burton-Edwards  
St. Thomas Episcopal Church  
2100 Hilton Ave.  
Columbus, GA 31906  
StThomasColumbus.org

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A summary of the *The Gardener and the Carpenter* and an interview with the author are at:  
<https://www.npr.org/2017/12/11/569907638/the-carpenter-vs-the-gardener-two-models-of-modern-parenting>

Ron Finley's TED talk is at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EzZzZ\\_qpZ4w](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EzZzZ_qpZ4w)