

# Strange Gardening

*The Rev. Geoff Parker to First Parish Church - Brunswick, ME*

Sunday, June 17, 2018

Scripture: [Ezekiel 17:22-24](#)

## Introduction to the Scripture

Today, our scripture comes from the prophet Ezekiel, and the writer's imaginative language for what God is in the midst of recreating. Ezekiel was part of the priestly class of Hebrew life that had been exiled from their homeland by the Babylonians in 5th century B.C.E.

So he knows what it is to have his world shattered, and to dream of the world turned whole and new. So we will hear a vision of that hoped for wholeness today, a bit of holy gardening.

Listen for what grows, and what doesn't, for what is mighty and what isn't. For what God does with the powerful and grand things, and what God does with those things which seem so small.

## Sermon

Height and fullness are a big part of life in the plant world. Where your branches are, how many leaves you have, these are not just for show... this is how you live. This is how you live among—and often over—the other plants of the world around you. Tender shoots are precious offspring in tree life, I figure, though I rely on tree experts to tell me anything, quite honestly. My garden grows exactly as it wants to, since I don't know how to make it grow any other way.

Ezekiel dreams of a world after all that he has lost, his home, his king, his temple, – sometimes it has felt like even his God has packed up and moved away—he dreams of a world where all that loss begins to sprout again and grow. A world where God will make a mighty tree of this tiny little tendril of hope that the prophet has been hanging on to.

It's a good reminder of how power works in the Bible. How God works with it.

God sifts through seven sons and find the smallest, harp-singi-est, lamb carrying-est one,

and calls him King David. God zooms right over the nurseries of every palace in the world, and every crowned head within them, and find a carpenter and his wife in a stable and says, here then, is the Prince of Peace. Paul will say, "the weakness of God is stronger than human strength."

God's way is the upside down way that turns the world right-side up.

And yet,  
we all too often align ourselves with rules and rulers  
more concerned with power over  
than God's power with.

In thinking about what God calls powerful in scripture: the dry tree, the low tree, the tender shoot

It is Father's Day today. I am not a father, but, having been raised by two men, I have more fathers than most, and I have been trying to be a man at least for 39 years, so maybe you'll permit me to say something about it anyway. I know that I am lucky to have wonderful role models, even if I have occasionally not been so sure of myself. And, giving thanks for the hard work of parenting and fathers of all stripes, I have been thinking this week on what God's gardening in the prophet's vision has to say about fathering, about raising men... because, well, the men have some listening to do.

Jesus and the prophets tell us over and over again of God's remarkable and surprising way of power, of might, of justice, of love... and well, we forget all about it. The Bible is full of stories of men behaving badly, killing each other for power, using women as objects and commodities. Even that wonderful singing young King David became a murderer and abuser of women.

In a time in which so much has changed in what is possible for women and girls, I am often sad of just how narrow a path there is for men and boys, and what that does to them, and of course to women. Of course, I do not mean that the world has changed so much it is no longer the case that the world is overwhelmingly tilted in favor of maleness. We have a lot of work to do to make the world more equal, more equitable for women.

I mean that the definition of maleness, and hence of fatherhood and sonship are overwhelmingly:

- **Emotionally repressive to the point of pain.** I saw a Father's Day card recently where the

front was in faux hand writing. It said, "I love you, dad." Which was then immediately crossed out, saying below "too weird, I mean, you're alright." We can't even pull off a hallmark card in this version of being a man.

- **Transactional about relationships with women, with our families, and with others.**
  - Having turned the notion of being a providing and supporting spouse into its hellish mirror image, there are so many working under the assumption that basic human kindness to a woman entitles them to her time, her attention, and her body.
  - living with the reality of a government that is currently **enacting a policy of separating those seeking asylum in our country from their children**, as some mad form of deterrent or a political bargaining chip. And in a world in which we were all encouraged to live into emotional and compassionate selves, this could not happen.
- **Focused on status and power, largely seen through the lens of physical strength and violence**

We have heard even more in the last few months of multiple victim shootings triggered by a boy who felt rejected in personal life, professional life, or other. And as the economy fails, addiction and depression mounts, indeed we are seeing workplace violence and suicide to match. As their emotions are shut down they have no where to turn, and as they have been taught that relationships are transactions, they have sense of their own belovedness, their own worth... and that despair crashes over them, and often those around them.

We can not continue to live with images of maleness that leave so little room for humanness.

Because it is not simply about being the biggest, the mightiest tree in Ezekiel's vision. The great tree of life that he sees is not the one which has overshadowed or crowded out all the other life around it; God yearns to plant something that will lead to the flourishing of all life in and around and under it.

No tree that can be a part of a more flourishing life can live in those small little boxes in the sidewalk. You know the ones, right? Those little windows in the pavement... you can put a tree there, but it won't ever really flourish.

It doesn't have to be this way. I have to believe that. It doesn't have to handed down like some sort of torturous family heirloom. After all, Ezekiel was the prophet who began the radical theology that the sins of the father were not the sins of the son.

We need to nurture and support young men and boys, and help them to imagine a masculinity of connection and compassion, because the alternative is killing them, and others. The less space we allow them to grow into exactly the version of themselves that gives them life, their communities life, their children life, the less we will experience Ezekiel's hoped for replanting in the house of God.

We need each other for this, we need fathers, grandfathers, and uncles... we need mentors, we need women, too... but we have got to tear up this version of maleness that has oppressing and making less of both women and men for millennia.

So I give thanks for all the men—and women—who continue to bear witness and teach and show God's flourishing in the tender shoots... which is the power and peace beyond understanding, who show us that emotions connect us to our common humanity both in joy and heartbreak, that relationships are called to a mutual witnessing and nurturing, and that lives are fullest when they are not about status and power over, but about belovedness and power *with*.

Thanks be to God for all the small and monumental ways you nurture a more diverse garden of human expression and identity. It may save a life, it may save the world.

Because the prophet has shown us that the mightiest tree is the one that finds its place in the fullness of all creation. That nurtures and shelters as much as it stands tall. That connects itself in God's giving and receiving web of spirit and of life.

God has spoken.

God will accomplish it.

God with us.

God mothering us,

God fathering us,

God raising us and inviting us to grow into our unique and flourishing selves.

God will accomplish it. Amen.